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## Ethnographic Significance of Indigenous Fiction: An Anthropological Reading of Narayan's *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*

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### Abstract

Ever since the Literary Turn of the 1980s, anthropology has been associated with various disciplines that document human experiences. Among them, fiction arguably has prominence as many influential anthropologists have also been fictional writers themselves. Works based on fieldwork experiences offer authentic insights into the societies they depict since the authors witness the realities firsthand. Rooted in real-life observations, such works often function as fictionalised ethnographies, incorporating details that may not appear in formal anthropological records. In this case, fictional works by Indigenous writers can also lay claim to be ethnographic due to their emic approach to societal depiction. These works provide rich, detailed descriptions that allow readers to grasp the social significance of cultural acts, a concept Clifford Geertz referred to as ‘thick description.’ Geertz’s idea emphasises the interpretation of the multiple layers of meaning within a cultural practice. Narayan's

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*Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* portrays the Malayarayar community that inhabits the Western Ghats of Kerala. This paper seeks to analyse the novel as a work of Indigenous fiction, highlighting its anthropological qualities and demonstrating how it serves as a form of ‘thick description.’

**Keywords:** Ethnography, Indigenous Fiction, Clifford Geertz, Narayan’s *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, thick description.

## Introduction

In the introduction to the much-acclaimed work *Writing Culture*, James Clifford presented a transformative argument that “ethnographic writing can be properly called fictions in the sense of something made or fashioned” (6). This argument, which challenged the traditional understanding of ethnography, was the crucial starting point for exploring the connection between Anthropology and Literature. It inspired academia to question the differentiation between objective ethnographic material and a subjective literary piece if ethnographies have fictional characteristics. Clifford’s statement is an invitation to investigate the boundaries between the two disciplines by looking at their nature. Clifford also mapped the scientific rigour of ethnography within linguistic levels as adherence to particular stylistic formats. Contemporary approaches to ethnography consider Anthropologists as writers of fiction who manipulate the art of rhetoric to persuade readers to take a specific position (Watson 249). Perceptive from these views is that the modalities of presentation in ethnography and fiction mainly cause their differentiation. Eriksen says that novels “which are simultaneously the production of society and the contribution to the self-definition and reification of that society, has the additional virtue of presenting some ethnographic evidence. (172). However, he warns about the status of ethnographic material in fictional works.

Mention must be made of the intended meaning of the word ‘fiction’ used in this paper. It need not be confused with the imagination or fictitious character of the genre in general. Instead, fiction here is a type of realist semi-fictional work rooted in verifiably ethnographic data of a community it represents. Written by indigenous writers, they are dense in their portrayal of the community. Taking its cue from fiction’s ability to record the ethnographic data of the society under the description, this paper attempts to read *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* through an Anthropological lens. Using Geertz’s ‘thick description’ as its analysis theory, this paper construes fictional space as an authentic ethnographic record that offers an emic perspective.

### **Literary Turn, Ethnography and Fiction**

The Literary Turn of the 1980s reassessed Anthropology’s shared ties with other disciplines while evaluating its development. As a result, two different perspectives within the field have become prominent. One perspective turned the anthropologists toward different genres of literature, intending to unearth anthropological data and encouraging them to take literary endeavours. At the same time, the other looked for the literary characteristic of anthropology itself. Arguably, this was spearheaded by James Clifford and his party in the famous book *Writing Culture*, which analysed anthropology to unearth its literary qualities. Looking at the process behind gathering ethnographic data and its publication, Clifford contended the scientific status of Anthropology. He points out that the ethnographer’s personal experiences are removed by the compulsion to maintain impersonal standards in ethnography:

The subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text. At best, the author's personal voice is seen as a style in the weak sense: a tone or

embellishment of the facts. Moreover, the ethnographer's actual field experience is presented only in very stylised ways. States of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorship, important failures, changes, of course, and excessive pleasures are excluded from the published account. (13)

According to Clifford, removing the ethnographer's personae from the written manuscript and other strenuous stylistic strategies only confirms the objective standards. It restricts the scientific rigour of the discipline within the suggested formation of the manuscript. In that case, it necessitates questions of inadequate representation to maintain standards and disassociation of authors' personae from their inherent knowledge before publishing. Keeping a diary alongside the ethnographic record is shared among all the researchers employed in fieldwork. (Malinowski's diary, published after he died in 1967, is the best example). While the ethnographic records reach the publication stage, the researcher's personal experiences are left untouched, as diaries are considered less factual and, therefore, insignificant. In an interview, Amitav Ghosh says that after submitting his dissertation, he was left with a “nagging sense of dissatisfaction” because everything he considered important about his experience in Egypt was left unsaid. He further states that this dissatisfaction is common to every ethnographer and that they are “haunted by experiences” (536-537). It must be noted that the above is a response to the question regarding the publication of Ghosh’s novel *In An Antique Land*, which he wrote based on his fieldwork experiences in Egypt.

Restrictions laid by conventional ethnographic genres limit the freedom of the authors to express themselves. Such restriction causes Anthropologists to take literary endeavours by writing fiction to express their impressions on the realities of fieldwork freely. (Nigel 218;

Voorst 15). Centred around the realities of the fieldwork, these texts truthfully represent the societies they describe. From customs to rituals to beliefs to practices, the author-ethnographer strives to provide a culturally rich portrayal of the community with informed knowledge. The end product is an account that is reflexive, personal, and full of the author's presence rather than objective and dry. Therefore, fictional works rooted in reality can claim authenticity based on their comprehensive portrayal of the society they picture. Eventually, authenticity based on adherence to a specific writing style is questioned and undermined here. As Geertz argued, the ethnographer's effort to persuade the readers of actually "been there" has less to do with a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance and relies mostly on their way of writing. (1988, 4). Anand Pandian concurs that ethnography, which is deeply empirical and highly speculative, shares boundaries between literary genres like fiction, memoir, and travelogue. Thus, he marks ethnography as not only paying close attention to what is but also including a sweeping imagination of what else might also be. (6). By removing anthropology from its confined role of being factual and objective, Pandian extends the contours of ethnography to other disciplines. From this understanding, positing fiction as a source of ethnography can be an extension of the discipline rather than damage.

### **Fiction as Ethnography and Thick Description**

This brings attention to the subsequent discussion of considering fiction as a valid ethnographic source. The tendency to look at fiction as a form of entertainment arises owing to its imaginative nature. However, the same imaginative characteristics are central to ethnography since the data presented are the ethnographer's "own construction of other people's constructions. (Geertz 9)". Here, it must be clarified that these imaginary characteristics are imaginary only at the level of interpretation. They are not pure speculation

of the ethnographer without any factual foundations. Clifford's claims of ethnographic writings are called fiction in the "sense of something made or fashioned"(6) and are to be understood similarly. Breaking the established boundaries without defining the mutual characteristics of each discipline would confuse many levels. In this sense, fiction is not entirely an imaginary account of alien societies but is an account rooted in realities in the fictional format. So, the study focuses not on fiction in its literal sense but on the semi-fictional characteristics of the narration, which informs readers of the realities of distant societies. Such narrations offer a comprehensive account of societies, and the author's interpretation is given enough space to enhance the reader's understanding. In this way, the author's presence is preserved and maintained throughout the narration. In contrast to the general fictional narration, they are distinct due to their panoramic portrayal of actual societies.

Clifford Geertz's conceptualisation of "thin description" and "thick description" better explains the differences in the wholistic portrayal. In his article *Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, Geertz nuances the differences between 'twitch' and 'wink' by referring to the meaning-making process behind each. In this case, a twitch is an involuntary activity, whereas a wink is a conspiratorial signal to a friend. (6). Geertz warns readers of the dangers of mistaking one for another. At the centre of this analogy is an attempt to interpret the symbolic meanings that individuals assign to their actions within a specific cultural context. (Vecchione and Sean Seger 4). Therefore, the thin description stops at the level of describing a cultural act, whereas the thick description interprets the layers of meaning behind the act. Following Max Weber's notion of culture as entangled webs of meanings, Geertz argues that "the analysis of it therefore not an experimental science in

search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” (5). To him, culture can be read as codes entailing different meanings, which is a fact central to his argument for making interpretive anthropology. In this essay, Geertz offers a thick description as a narrative tool to achieve interpretive anthropology that unearths hidden, symbolic meanings behind cultural enactments. An example of this is Geertz’s *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, a detailed account of cockfights in a Balinese Village in 1958. By elaborating the meanings ascribed to the activity by the natives, Geertz penetrates the layers of meaning to offer an experience of being an actual participant in the event.

### Review of Literature

Anthropology and Literature are primarily connected due to their attempt to record the everyday lives of the societies they discuss. If both phenomena are incorporated into the everyday life of communities, they are only distinguished by their presentation modalities. Markowski opines, "If anthropology studies literature, and literature tells us what it means to be human, then anthropology of literature is destined to hit the nail on the head." (87). According to him, anthropology of literature is a scientific discipline that has chosen literature for its investigation. To C.S. Watson, literature, especially fiction, offers empirically verifiable data that deserves an anthropological gaze since it aims to provide a close representation of society, the same as ethnography. Criticism about the success and failure of such narratives based on the validation of facts applies equally to any ethnography due to their similar aim to represent. (256). The validation of fiction and ethnography does not necessarily eradicate boundaries between the disciplines, as hardcore anthropologists fear. Proponents of literary turn created a cosmopolitan platform to associate each discipline, beneficial to both. A researcher aims to collect ethnographic data without being

discriminatory towards the form in that sense. According to Nigel Rapport, the process of "zigzagging" between ethnography and fiction allows researchers to gain deeper insights into comparative truths of distinct phenomena. It also preserves the individuality and integrity of each perspective during the process. (218). As Rapport notes, this approach enables an immersive experience with different phenomena, facilitating a nuanced understanding of each within its phenomenology. However, complete fictional narratives without realist elements are ill-suited for this criss-crossing between genres. The primary aim of the investigation is the ethnographic content about a particular society; the 'anthropology of literature', as Watson called it, is not interested in fictional elements of the genre. To mark the narratives which are in rich possession of ethnographic contents, 'thick description' becomes a useful analytical tool. The significance of thick description rests on its ability to interpret symbolic meanings intertwined with culture. According to Schwandt, the 'thickness' is its interpretive characteristic of description rather than details. (296). Similarly, Holiday expresses his view: "What makes the thick description of social phenomenon possible is not its exhaustiveness of coverage, but how it scans the different facets of the social matrix or culture within which it is found and comes up with good analysis." (75). Vecchione and Seeger opine that the weakness of the thick description is its insufficient sensitivity to perspectival differences within a given culture and its inability to locate the culture in its macro-historical context. (7). However, proponents of thick description, including Clifford Geertz, argue that its strength is its ability to delve into the intricate layers of meaning within a culture, capturing the nuances of individual perspectives and situating them within their broader symbolic frameworks. This micro-level depth offers a nuanced understanding that often complements, rather than neglects, the macro-historical context. Priyanka Shivdas compares *Kocharethi* with the Australian nonfiction work *Dark Emu* to picture the confrontations between Indigenous and



non-Indigenous cultures. Accordingly, she establishes the similarity between Indigenous communities across the world. She describes *Kocharethi* as realistically styled fiction that attempts to describe the realities of Malayarayers' lives (6). Dharavath and Rani look at the novel as a significant feat in the literary field for Adivasis due to its ethnographic portrayal of the field occupied by elites. Without undermining the significance of the novel, they analyse the issues of adivasi women and the patriarchal structure using a feminist perspective. On the other hand, Soutima Adhikary considers the novel as a “voice of a defiant subalternity committed to writing its own history”, and Narayan has a “charge of promoting and presenting the authentic picture of this section of the society.” (344). Previous studies focused on the text's anthropological nature as a reservoir of Malayarayar cultural activities and its importance in the literary field. However, there is a possible lack of knowledge on what characterises the novel anthropological and how it is done. This paper addresses that gap by examining the text as an interpretive anthropology reflective in nature.

## Analysis

Geertz's main argument for his ‘thick description’ is based on his view that culture is a semiotic entity capable of being read and interpreted. Extending the use of thick descriptions to account for the interpretive side of anthropology, he destabilised the centrality of the authorial voice. The author, in thick description, aids in the process of understanding a particular social action along with its meaning in a given society. Because what authenticates a finished ethnographic manuscript is the promise of the fieldwork, ‘actually been there’ as James Clifford called it, novels embedded with ethnography also provide similar authenticity due to the author's relationship with the society. In the case of *Kocharethi*, Narayan hails from the same Malayarayar community that the text centres around. Focusing mainly on three

characters, Kunjipennu, Kochuraman and Parvathy, the novel records the various aspects of Malayarayar, who inhabits the Western Ghats of Kerala. From its publication, the novel was celebrated as the first-ever novel written by an Adivasi. Another aspect that promises rich ethnographic content is the motive behind the book's production. Having been provoked by the misrepresentation of his community, Narayan opted to write the novel. In his words: “We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system. We are not demons lacking inhumanity but a strong, hardworking and self-reliant community”. (209). Commitment to depict his society’s culture ensures a holistic portrayal of the community, validating the details. Subsequently, the author says he wrote the novel based on childhood memories, his grandfather’s stories and the rituals that his grandfather performed. (Jeyashree xvii). The novel's first part contains nuanced ethnographic details of the community, aptly described in the introduction as an ‘ethnohistorian's delight’. (Jeyashree xvii). *Kocharethi* offers insights regarding rituals, religious beliefs, marriage customs, naturally embedded lifestyles, and medicinal practices of the community. With the main focus on characters such as Kunjipennu, Kochuraman and Parvathy, the text touches upon the impacts of the modernist changes on the Malayarayar community.

Central to the lifestyle of Malayarayar are their social practices and religious beliefs, with which they are shown to be deeply connected. Most of these practices are associated with their natural surroundings and partly shaped by their worship of spirits. The most dominant form of belief in spirits can be seen in the community's medicinal practices. Incantation, going into a trance, and consecrating threads and ashes are practices associated with religion and are shown to be losing ground. Replacing medical practice linked with the supernatural, Kochuraman comes to prominence, showcasing the ways of herbal treatment.

His character also informs the readers about the method of preserving knowledge related to medicine. He learns medicine by listening to verses and their explanation and memorising them. (Narayan 4). The change from belief in spirits to natural herbs highlights the community's mentality and adaptation. Narayan also interprets the oral transmission of stories and knowledge within Indigenous communities. Similar to Geertz's work on Balinese cockfights, Naryan's novel is a record of a society really in existence. One sharp contrast between both is Narayan's account, which uses an emic approach that gives insider views.

Readers are provided with enormous details regarding the rites of the Malayarayar and their significance within the community. To help readers understand unfamiliar society's customs, Narayan provides a thick description that suggests the cultural accounts of Malayarayar. Assigned meanings to birds such as *Chavilliyan* and *theendari* are given in a way that represents real-life scenarios. Thus, the cry of *Chavilliyan* brings death to the community, and the sound of *theendari* alerts women about their menstruation cycle. Every important occasion is followed by observing customs sincerely practised by the community. Thus, the child's birth is followed by observing valayama (birth pollution), which lasts seven days. Family members and relatives are prohibited from doing certain activities during that period. Narayan provides the list of such things in the novel, "oil bath, toddy and meat, appearing before the deities and performing rites were taboo for all of them (family members)" (38). Similarly, a death in a family also brings such restrictions to prevent oneself from breaking the customs. Known as *pula*, the funeral rite observed for 16 days of isolation ends with a family meal. Women are moved into the part of the house called *eettappera* (period house) upon giving birth and while on their periods. Contact with the people and things is prohibited to avoid pollution within the community. Such measures show the

patriarchal current, which restricts women's freedom in the name of adherence to customs most of the time. In the text, the cultural practices of Malayarayar are highly patriarchal, which shows the highly vulnerable position of women in a male-dominated society. (93 Ramesh and Teena). Positioning himself as the ethnographer, Narayan records the practices as they are observed in reality rather than being sceptical about them. Leaving readers to understand the matter for themselves, he stops his authorial voice at the level of interpretation while demonstrating the significance of the customs in daily life. In this way, he directly makes the readers converse with the text as they understand an unfamiliar culture through it. Involving the readers in the text by giving them a realistic experience constitutes the main idea of thick description. His use of thick descriptions offers a complete picture of Malayarayar's norms and practises with their significance in the community.

Narayan records that the community is divided into five illams (clans), named after nearby trees and stones. The community has five illams: Vallayillam, Poothaniyillam, Madalakkattillam, Nellippullillam and Chokkayillam. Marriage between clans is possible only if they fall under specific regulations. Narayan details the clans and their relations through the character Ittyadi, who says, "Chokkayillam. Vala and Nellipulli are related, as are Poothanl and Modalakkattu. Someone belonging to Modalakkattu can marry either Valayillam or Nellipulli illam... Poothani and Nellipulli can marry from Vala" (Narayan 15). The above passage refers to the rule concerning marriages practised by the community. However, these customs are undermined as the next generation takes up mainstream culture's ways. Narayan describes Parvathy's transformation in the following way:

"She seemed to have become fairer. Her thick glossy black hair was gathered up into a thick knot held firmly in place with a pin. Silver anklets, slippers that had a gold-

coloured line on them, a gold-plated watch with a black strap on her left wrist, a ring... (Narayan, 188).

Her transformation is much more crucial as she can adapt to the new environment, motivating the young girls to follow her path. On the other hand, her slow distancing from the traditional customs, culminating in her decision to marry against such customs, is also to be paid attention. While addressing such acculturation, Narayan leaves the platform open to questions and discussions. To Malayarayar, land is never a property, as it is equated with the role of the mother. No details hint at the existence of currency among the individuals within the community; only at the later stage, where the non-indigenous contact the community, are descriptions of transactions and currency exist. Since Malayarayar could not count the money and understand the ways of the transactions, they often deceived the merchants.

“Mothallali had not mentioned the amount. Kunjumundan tried to add it up mentally.

How much did forty-three panam and seventy there half-chakram add up to?

Father and son argued over it for a while. Kunjumundan realised that his son was no better than himself- he did not know how to count. It was easier to assume that the promised amount had been given. ...” (Narayan 104).

Readers belonging to non-indigenous societies mainly possess accounts such as adivasis, which are primitive and ignorant. However, in the novel, they are provided with lived experiences that contradict their preconceived notions about indigenous societies. Narayan’s effective use of thick descriptions leaves them with an understanding of the Indigenous perception of the world. Being deceived and facing violence, their views of non-indigenous people were reduced to distrust and doubt. References given in the text mark the

background of the text in the initial stage of India's freedom from the British. Mention of the Temple Entry Proclamation Act of 1936 given by Maharaja Chithirai Thirunal Balarama Varma, allowing entry into the temple for everyone, Gandhi and Congress, Youths taking part in the protest are made in the text. Malayarayar, except those who received a formal education, failed to understand the changes around them, as they did not trust the non-indigenous. Narayan pictures the distrust towards the mainstream societies as incidents are described from the Malayarayar's view. The Temple Entry Act is described as a "ploy to kill" (Narayan 120), and the confusion between Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi as to who was king and who was prime minister shows the extent of the distance. Here, Naryan helps readers comprehend the differences between the Malayarayar and non-indigenous communities regarding world views, culture, and social structure. Narayan's thick description offers a holistic portrayal of the community by describing the meaning behind its social structure, rites, and customs. James Clifford states, "Insiders, studying their own cultures, offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways." (9). Similarly, Narayan, in the novel, details the culture, religion, and lifestyle of his community while also describing the challenges they face in their daily life. Thus, the insider in him makes the readers experience the social practices along with the characters, which leads to a better understanding of the challenges of Indigenous lives.

## Conclusion

Narayan's *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* offers valid evidence of the ethnographic capabilities of Indigenous fiction. The novel's detailed portrayal of the Malayarayar community offers readers a holistic understanding of a society often misrepresented or overlooked in mainstream narratives. Using an emic approach, Narayan bridges the gap

between fiction and anthropology, delivering what Clifford Geertz termed ‘thick description.’ By recording cultural practices, oral traditions, and the community's worldview, the novel positions itself as an authentic account of a lived experience. The text illuminates the intricate connections between the Malayarayar's social practices, religious beliefs, and natural surroundings while also addressing the gradual encroachment of modernity and its impact on the community. Narayan's depiction of cultural rituals, hierarchical clan structures, and Indigenous medicine preserves the traditional knowledge and identity of the community that might otherwise have faded away. Moreover, his insider perspective challenges the preconceived notions of non-Indigenous readers, leading to an understanding of Indigenous societies and their complex relationships with the mainstream world.

By recording the cultural, historical, and social life of the Malayarayar with such depth and precision, *Kocharethi* asserts itself as both a literary endeavour and an anthropological document. The novel not only preserves the cultural identity of the Malayarayar but also serves as an important tool for cross-cultural dialogue, making a significant contribution to both literature and anthropology.

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