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Fishscapes: Noticing Multispecies Entanglements in a Nair Taravad*

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Abstract

This paper narrates the interspecies relatedness and gendered entanglements in the life journey of anchovies from the oceans to the plate. In dynamic capitalist sites, anchovies are transformed from their very being into cheap resources and are translated as new commodity frontiers with varying social and ecological consequences. Anchovies were once part of the staple diet of the Nair households, which I describe in this paper. My inquiry for this paper begins here. How did the anchovy disappear from our everyday life? What does it say about gender inequality, modernity, and environmental change? Fishscapes, in this paper, are stories that Nair women have to say about their fish-making practices, reminiscing about their social encounters with anchovies. Autoethnographic by design, this paper explores the situated perspectives of Nair women's relatedness with anchovy as the starting point to understand how their daily experiences and ways of knowing interface with historical and layered patches of modernisation, patriarchy, and environmental change in a more-than-human world.

Keywords

Fish, Fisheries, Gender, Multispecies, Situated Knowledge, Entanglements

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Introduction

In a capitalist, postcolonial, and patriarchal modern world, it becomes crucial to understand how our relations with nonhumans contribute to gender inequalities and environmental injustices.[1] This could be achieved by noticing multispecies entanglements at the local level.[2] Entanglement seeks to capture how humans and nonhumans entrap each other, making it necessary to explore the networks of dependencies that constrain and drive the human condition.[3] Fishes, and the anchovy in particular, that have traversed from the ocean's depth to lunch or dinner plates is the principle of relatedness that holds the different sections of this paper together.

Affordability, availability, and accessibility were the key characteristics that made anchovy a preferred fish among local households in the coastal villages of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. They also provided direct local employment to many women fish vendors in the coastal fishing households. However, anchovies are today attributed as lower-value products and diverted to fishmeal production. Fishers observe that the size of anchovies has decreased in the last few decades, owing to factors such as ocean warming and pollution. The shrinking of size further warrants more manual labour to prepare the fish. The rising sea surface temperatures due to global warming have also resulted in the migration of anchovies towards the southwest coast comparatively earlier than usual migration times.[4] Consequently, there is an increase in the anchovy catch along the Konkan coast rather than that of Kerala.

In dynamic capitalist sites, anchovies are transformed from their very being into cheap resources and are translated as new commodity frontiers with varying social and ecological consequences.[5] Once captured, they are dried, minced, and ground into fishmeal and oil. The global prices of fishmeal are rising due to the increased demand from the farmed fish industry. Simultaneously, fishmeal is being substituted as animal feed, as there has been a rise in corn prices due to severe droughts in the corn-producing nations. The demand for fishmeal has also increased as it is considered an approved organic feed and fertiliser. There is also a rise in demand for fish oil as humans have increased their direct consumption of Omega 3 pills.

It is in the contexts mentioned above of changes happening to the lives of anchovies that I examine the entangled realities among a group of Nair families. Anchovies were once part of the staple diet of the Nair households, which I am describing in this paper. These small, shiny fish were delicacies, such as a curry that

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1 C. Knott, N. Power, B. Neis, and K. Frangoudes, 'North Atlantic Fishy Feminist and the More-than-human Approach: A Conversation', *Gender, Place, and Cultures*, 29, 12, 2022, 1767–87.

2 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17–25.

3 I. Hodder, *Studies in Human-thing Entanglement* (e-book, 2016) Accessed at http://www.ian-hodder.com/books/studies-human-thing-entanglement#:~:text=This%20book%2C%20published%20only%20online,application%20of%20formal%20network%20analysis.

4 V. Bharti and J. Jayasankar, *Life Cycle of Anchovy and Climate Driven Changes in its Distribution on the Southwest Coast of India*. Marine Fisheries Information Service Technical and Extension Series, 239. ICAR-CMFRI, 2019), 1–10. Accessed at http://eprints.cmfri.org.in/14304/1/MFIS_239_1.pdf

5 J.W. Moore, J.W. 'The Rise of Cheap Nature' in J.W. Moore (ed.). *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 78–115.

went well with smashed and cooked tapioca, jackfruit, and rice. Fried anchovies were a favourite among children. Dried anchovies and chutneys made from them were the primary sources of protein supplements during the lean fishing seasons, the monsoons. However, these days, only some households buy anchovies. My inquiry for this paper begins here. How did the anchovy disappear from our everyday life? What does it say about gender inequality, modernity, and environmental change?

Theoretical and Methodological Pathways

Autoethnographic by design, this study has adopted a feminist perspective to explore the entangled nature of fish, food, and humans in a more-than-human world. Specifically, this paper explores the nature of multi-species entanglements through the lens of women's situated knowledge. Situated knowledge refers to the local, specific knowledge that has its value on the particular situation at hand.[6] This is subjective knowledge that is local, partial, plural, and has its value in the particular situation at hand, which is embedded with the social positions and lived experiences of actors.[7] Often, it is found to be critical in nurturing shared conversations and sustaining solidarity networks.[8] Such a perspective on knowledge recognises the collective historical subjectivity and agency of embodied actors, which also opens up pathways to listen to other narratives and storytelling practices of otherwise subjugated actors.[9]

Feminist perspectives of situated knowledge that recognise the intersectional, plural and dynamic nature of knowledge systems invoke us to be attentive to the contexts of people's everyday practice in both the public and private spheres. Such a theoretical frame questions the production, circulation, and framing of knowledge as merely local and in functionalist terms, and asks us to pursue a deeper engagement with the plural, partial and intersectional nature of knowledge. Knowledge in the context of this paper is embodied in women's everyday practices, as an assemblage of diverse perspectives and lived experiences signifying multispecies relatedness and entanglements. Further, exploring the entangled nature of humans in a more-than-human world offers enough scope to disrupt the existing hierarchies of differences within and across species.[10] Such an approach could also nurture more ecologically responsible relations to nature.[11]

Fishscapes, in this paper, are stories that Nair women have to tell about their fish-making practices, reminiscing about their social encounters with anchovies. The differential patterns of any social encounter can be understood only by examining the knowing of active subjects or actors including their interactions, negotiations and

6 D. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3, 1988, 575–599.
7 S.D. Santha, *Climate Change and Adaptive Innovation: A Model for Social Work Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020), 179.
8 D. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges', 584.
9 Ibid.
10 B. Rowe, 'It I.S. about Chicken: Chick-fil-A, Posthumanist Intersectionality, and Gastro-aesthetic Pedagogy', *Journal of Thought*, 48, 2, 2013, 89–111.
11 A. Neimanis, 'Feminist Subjectivity, Watered', *Feminist Review*, 103, 2013, 23–41.

struggles in the relevant social worlds.[12] This paper explores the situated perspectives of Nair women's relatedness with anchovy as the starting point to understand how their daily experiences and ways of knowing interface with historical and layered patches of modernisation, patriarchy, and environmental change in a more-than-human world. The paper attempts to locate class, caste, and gendered struggles shaping women's everyday lives through their storytelling and fish-making practices. Fish-making is also a way of knowing, showcasing the situated ways in which women, anchovies, and other fish are entangled with each other. In this context, anchovies have relation-making powers. Such knowledge and practices are also capable of nurturing beneficial caring relationships in a more-than-human world.[13]

Examining the situated nature of fish-making also implies exploring the embedded power relations within and beyond the Nair Taravad. Analysing power involves reflecting on how the values, interests, knowledge and actions of Nair women are being contested, ignored or recognised by other actors, specifically men within the Taravad. A close examination of the fish-making practices could also unravel the nature of embedded power and its role in producing and sustaining inequalities within the Taravad. Further, it also helps us to reflect on the extent to which actors adhere to (or deviate from) shared values and norms of their social world. Such a perspective assumes that knowledge emerges out of contested and negotiated spaces. There could be different knowledge claims, countering and interacting within and across extended members of the Taravad, between women, between men and women, or between grandmothers, daughters and granddaughters. Different forms of knowledge on fish and fish-making circulate in parallel, where notions of taste, freshness, preferences, nostalgia, power and autonomy pervade the life practices of all women in the Nair Taravad.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, I have adopted an autoethnographic approach to carry out this study. I am also a family member of the Nair Taravad described in this paper. As a broader research approach, autoethnography has helped me analyse my Nair Taravad's transitions and family members' struggles and aspirations in the context of modernisation and development processes post the setting up of a Technopark in the region. Such an approach also aided in making sense of the changing cultural norms, experiences, and practices within the Taravad.[14] The autoethnography strived to unearth the situational and practical form of knowing that is generated through participative and conversational interviews. My role as an ethnographer was to remain aware of the dynamic and emergent nature of my social encounters with women, men, and children in the Nair Taravad, specifically in the context of initiating conversations on anchovies and their everyday life practices. I had to be attentive to the contexts of engagement in which the knowledge of every

12 K. Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.
13 K.P. Whyte and C. Cuomo, 'Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies', in S.M. Gardiner and A. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 234–247.
14 The author has described these transitions in detail, though they are not the focus of this paper. See S.D. Santha, 'Risk, Trust, and Social Networks: A Study Among Middle-class Nair Families near Technopark, Kerala', in M.K. Jha and Pushpendra (eds), *Beyond Consumption: India's New Middle Class in the Neo-liberal Times*. (London: Routledge, 2021), 21–34.

actor is applied.[15] Further, these conversational interviews and oral histories helped me not only in deeply exploring the situatedness of women's specific knowledge, social positions and lived experiences, but also in terms of self-reflecting how certain forms of knowledge interface, and multispecies entanglements sustain or reproduce inequalities.

In addition to the broader autoethnographic work, the present paper specifically investigates human nature through the lens of an interspecies relationship. The autoethnographic approach enabled me to closely reflect upon the everyday life experiences and understandings of Nair women engaged in fish-making practices. The approach gave voices to those narratives and knowledge systems that would have otherwise remained hidden within the four walls of the kitchen in the Nair Taravad. Through the art of noticing and listening to stories told and retold, a modest attempt is made to share stories on multispecies entanglements.[16] The kitchen, the market, the dining rooms, the fences (that act as boundaries for the nuclear households and at the same time facilitate shared conversations), and the Taravad as such are storied places where connections and relatedness are explored. Oral histories, stories, observations, and research diaries have helped to understand past stories of multispecies entanglements and their overlapping trajectories of world-making.

All the 35 families I interacted with were earlier members of a single matrilineal joint family, the Taravad. However, today these families have fragmented into nuclear households and cannot be purely categorised as matrilineal. The critical data for this paper is drawn from in-depth interviews with eight women members of the Nair Taravad. Among the 35 families, the selection of these eight women from eight different Nair families was crucial as they had witnessed and experienced fish-making across three generations of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. Supplementary interviews were carried out with three male members as well. I purposively selected these participants, knowing that they would be able to provide me with rich insights into their everyday entanglements with the anchovy. All participants were married, though the age group varied. While all the men were above their forties, the age group of women ranged between 30 and 60. All women participants were graduates, while the men had some form of higher education and technical skills. They were all employed in government-aided institutions or the private sector.

Sites of Being and Becoming: The Nair Taravad

In a simplistic sense, households of the Nair community in Kerala are referred to as Taravad. Nevertheless, there are different discourses on what a Taravad is. Gough defines the Taravad as a matrilineage of ancestral relations and reciprocal commitments whose solidarity arises from feelings of descent to a common

15 M. Lauer and S. Aswani, 'Indigenous Ecological Knowledge as Situated Practices: Understanding Fishers' Knowledge in the Western Solomon Islands', *American Anthropologist*, 111, 3, 2009, 317–329.

16 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom,* 159.

ancestress.[17] Moore observes that the Taravad, as a house-and-land unit, is not a mere architectural structure or property that may be transacted through lineage or market principles, where its members can separate themselves easily and at will.[18] Instead, the Taravad is a holistic, ritually significant unit.[19]

In essence, the Taravad is a labyrinth of power relations embedded in caste identities and gendered roles. In matrilineal Nair households, women inherit property such as land or a house, and this plays a vital role in shaping gender relations within and outside the family. The Nair Taravad, as a site of becoming, is thus characterised by diverse matrilocal practices where the daughter's husband lives with his wife's family, allowing the continuity of property ownership. After marriage, the sons leave the Taravad to stay in their wives' houses or sometimes in separate houses within the same family compound.

Historically, Nairs were the dominant caste and the chief landholders in most villages of erstwhile Travancore.[20] (Travancore consists of the present-day districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, and Idukki in the state of Kerala.) The Nair woman could simultaneously maintain unions with more than one man.[21] Their hypergamous, matrilineal marriage system meant that the wives of the members of the Royal family and top administrators were Nairs.[22] In the administration of Travancore in the 1750s, more than 60 per cent of the government posts were held by Nairs. However, from the 1850s, economic pressures, changing social values, and legal reforms ending matriliny seriously weakened the Nair matrilineal joint family and hastened its disintegration.[23] The perpetuation of a cash economy, western-style education, improved communications, and a British-inspired law system contributed to the transitions in the Nair Taravad and their socioeconomic positions and political aspirations.[24] As the bonds of the matrilineal family loosened, so did the hold of Nairs on the land.[25]

Early twentieth-century Kerala thus witnessed drastic changes in the joint family system, changing demographic profile, and the rise of agrarian capitalist tendencies transforming land relationships and matrilineal kinship practices.[26] The Kerala development model that followed post-independence has received global acclaim for its high achievements, such as a high literacy rate, favourable social development, better access to healthcare, women's employment, and nuclear families.[27] However,

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17 E.K. Gough, 'Nayar: North Kerala', in D. M. Schneider and E.K. Gough (eds), *Matrilineal Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 298–385.
18 M.A. Moore, 'A New Look at the Nayar Taravad', *Man* 20, 3, 1985, 523–541.
19 Ibid.
20 R. Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976, 2014).
21 M.A. Moore, 'A New Look'; R. Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance.*
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 P.M. Mathew, 'The Exploitation of Women Labour: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Kerala', *Social Scientist,* 13, 10/11, 1985, 28–47.
26 S. Arun, *Development and Gender Capital in India: Change, Continuity, and Conflict in Kerala* (London: Routledge, 2018).
27 R. Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala Became 'a model'*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); J. Drèze and A. Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

there is a strong gender paradox embedded in this model of development.[28] Though Kerala's modernity resulted from anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle, the radical transformation of the social order, specifically caste-based and gendered practices, was located only in the male-dominated public sphere.[29] Though Kerala's development model attempted to resolve caste hierarchies in the public sphere, it failed to resolve the contradictions of gender that existed within it.[30] The Taravad, by this time, was infested by patriarchy.

Devika asserts that there are ambiguities concerning women's liberation in the Kerala development model.[31] Further, the programmes churned out of it have resulted in the 'calcification of modern patriarchy', signifying the emergence of a 'post-Kerala model' patriarchy.[32] The agency of the educated, often employed middle-class women is more or less derived from consent with patriarchy.[33] Further, the emergence of the culture industry through popular journals and cinema also paved the way for the commodification and objectification of women.[34] Gradually, there has been a gendering of roles, with women being confined to the private sphere, playing familial and caregiving roles, while men are deemed more active in the public sphere.[35] Today, arranged marriages are the norm, facilitated between families of similar social status and caste.[36] Family members play a dominant role in deciding women's choice of education and employment. Factors such as childcare, physical mobility, and working hours shape decision-making.[37] Younger women and girls are restricted from travelling alone after dark.

Understanding how capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy as diverse systems of oppression operate, intersect, and produce inequalities within and between species is especially important in the context of enhanced volatility and vulnerabilities associated with global environmental change.[38] This paper is guided by the assumption that anchovies and Nair women are historical actors witnessing drastic changes in their eco-social worlds. The following section narrates the memoirs of Nair women and their entanglements with anchovies, which also demonstrates how gender, a dynamic construct, becomes salient through everyday caring, fish-making practices, and performance of subjectivities.[39]

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28 J. Devika, 'Negotiating Women's Social Space: Public Debates on Gender in Early Modern Kerala, India', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7, 1, 2006, 43–61.
29 T.K. Ramachandran, 'Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala society', *Social Scientist*, 23, 1/3, 1995, 109-123.
30 S. Harikrishnan, *Social Spaces and the Public Sphere: A Spatial History of Modernity in Kerala*. (London: Routledge, 2023).
31 J. Devika, 'The Malayali Sexual Revolution: Sex, "Liberation" and Family Planning in Kerala', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 39, 3, 2005, 344–374.
32 J. Devika, 'Gender in Contemporary Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49, 17, 2014, 38–39.
33 J. Devika, 'Negotiating women's social space', 54.
34 T.K. Ramachandran, 'Notes on the making of feminine identity'.
35 J. Devika, 'Negotiating women's social space', 54; S. Harikrishnan, *Social Spaces and the Public Sphere.*
36 S. Arun, *Development and Gender.*
37 Ibid.
38 C. Knott, N. Power, B. Neis, and K. Frangoudes, 'North Atlantic Fishy Feminist'.
39 A. Nightingale, 'The Nature of Gender: Work, Gender, and Environment', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24, 2, 2006, 165–85; E. Probyn, *Eating the Ocean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Memoirs on the Missing Fish: The *Netholi*

Anchovies are locally called *netholi* in this region. All women participants began the conversation by explaining the three types of anchovies: the black, white, and the *conetholi*, a bigger variety than the first two. It is more seasonal, rare, and less tasty. While the women shared different traits of the anchovy, the men were clueless about the same. The popular belief among these women is that the black variety is tastier than the white fish. The former has more flesh when compared to the white, which has more bones. A woman in her late fifties, who had begun to cook fish a decade ago, said:

> I like the white one; it looks gorgeous, shining, and silvery. However, I was surprised to know that people liked the taste of the black one. And this knowledge was recent to me.

A woman who was very lean before her marriage said that she used to be teased by her friends and relatives with the nickname 'netholi'. The conversations usually followed were on the diverse anchovy cuisines and nostalgia surrounding the same. A woman shared her knowledge as follows:

> Cuisines change based on where you are going after marriage. If you marry someone from a Nair family along our coast, then there will not be any difference in what we cook and what they cook. In my in-laws' place, there is no sea fish. It is more rivers over there. So, we do not get the fresh netholi there to make any curry out of it. Occasionally they will simmer the dried netholi with coconut. I learned to make netholi peera [anchovy simmered with coconut] from my sisters-in-law, which I learned only after my marriage.

Some women shared their insights on how each anchovy dish varied with the type of ingredients added to the curry. The ingredients may vary, including tamarind, coconut, red or green chilli, or raw mango. The presence or absence of any of these will change the taste of the curry. A woman in her late thirties (who has three younger sisters, with all their husbands working abroad in the Middle East and visiting them once every three years) said:

> My favourite fish was netholi. We can make two types of fish curry. One is brown, while the other is yellow. The brown curry is made by frying red chilli, grinding it with spices, and marinating the fish. In the second, you add raw green chilli without frying. I like the latter. My mom makes brown curry, which my dad likes. Earlier, this did not matter, as I used to get my favourite curry, which someone from any one of our extended joint families would have prepared. With nuclear families, this practice of sharing has stopped. Moreover, only men find their way. Our husbands in the Gulf also

prefer to have a curry to their liking. Nevertheless, we should cook for them when they are here, as they are fed up with their cooking.

Another woman said:

In my in-laws' place, they add the 'kudampuli' or the Malabar Tamarind to the fish curry. They do not add coconuts like we do here in my home. I add coconut and common tamarind to all my fish curries.

Most women said that they learned to cook fish from their mothers. First, by observing how they do and slowly getting into cleaning, cutting, and cooking rituals. Most women learned to cook fish curry with *netholi* when they were 16 or 17. It might be because it was smaller and cleaner than other big fish. There is little to waste; therefore, it must be carefully handled.

We learn to cook fish by engaging with the smaller ones first. The big fish, we learn to cook only after our marriage. That is how it is. It is like learning to drive a bike before one learns to drive a car.

A woman in her late thirties said:

I cooked fish for the first time during the 'Attukal Pongala'.[40] When my mother went to the ceremony, I was seventeen. I had to cook for my dad, brother, and uncles. My mother had given instructions the previous day on how to cook the fish. God's grace, all of them liked my curry.

These conversations soon became nostalgic, with both women and men sharing their memories of how the fish tasted in the past. A woman in her late fifties shared:

I still relish the aroma of grandma's netholi curry. I used to relish her delicious netholi curry cooked with raw mango. The taste of her netholi curry will always remain in my memory. No one knows how to cook like that.

After a pause, she continued:

It no longer tastes like the earlier days. Earlier, we could sense the quality of the fish from its aroma when the curry was boiling. Now, there is no aroma.

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40 Attukal Pongala is a women's offering to the goddess Bhagavathy at Attukal Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Though this public rice cooking by women was a tradition followed by less-privileged communities in paddy fields and sacred groves, it spontaneously became a mass ritual followed by all caste and class groups of women. Women participating in this ritual believe the phenomenon is self-empowering. More details are available in D. Jennett, 'A Million "Shaktis" Rising: Pongala, a Women's Festival in Kerala, India', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 21, 1, 2005, 35–55.

Both taste and smell have disappeared. And then, we enhance the flavour and aroma by adding packaged masalas (spices).

Similarly, other women in their fifties shared:

Taste has changed. But the cooks too! We are the cooks now. We must find a way to match our mom's and grandma's cooking. There are also transitions between who cooks and how we cook. The gravy was prepared by manually grinding the chilli and spices in the grinding stone. A few years ago, we began to use mixers to make masala. Moreover, today, we buy masala powder from the store. All these changes affect the taste of the fish. Early, all masalas were made at home. Moreover, that added to the taste of the curry. We have aged, too, so our taste buds would also have changed.

These conversations finally ended up on issues such as the deterioration of the global ocean environment, pollution, and the fish value chain commodification. Both women and men believe the fish caught in their coastal waters is fresh and tasty, while those from other seas and states are filled with preservatives and toxic chemicals. The fish imported from other states does not taste good, as they are preserved with ice and chemicals for a long time. Fish are stored in cold storage whenever there is a slump in prices. A woman recollected the transitions:

Earlier, the Mukkuvar[41] women from our coast used to bring fish to our homes. Mostly they were from the catch their husbands or relatives brought to the shore: fresh fish and much less ice. We used to have good relationships with the women vendors. Aanchi and Kuttathi were of my mothers' age. After their generation, then came Selvy and Shiney, who were my age. We used to attend their wedding and Christmas celebrations, and they used to attend our weddings and Onam feast. Some days they come after their sales and have lunch with us. These shared conversations that used to happen were of both our sorrows and happiness. Fish was a medium for our conversations. There was no compulsion to buy. Nevertheless, we used to buy due to compassion. Today, this is not the scenario. Post-covid, men vendors on scooters or bikes have replaced these women. We must buy regularly from them. Otherwise, they will not sell us any fish. They are also arrogant. Unlike the women, the men do not sell the smaller fish. We cannot afford a full big fish. Earlier, we used to buy a big fish and share it among the extended families. Today, with the men (sons-in-law) in these families having different tastes, sharing a fish is no more viable. We must bear the cost of the big fish alone and store it in our refrigerator …

41 An ethnic fishing community found along the coast of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

A woman commented with disdain:

> Today, any fish is toxic. The oceans are polluted with plastics, oil, and chemicals. Furthermore, fish imported from other states are adulterated with formalin, a chemical used in mortuaries to preserve corpses. Imagine that these profit mongers have transformed our fish into a corpse. Earlier, netholi used to remain fresh for three to four days without any decay. Today, it is not like that. Earlier fish was very fresh; they had a glazing body. The fish was tasty, too. We would know the quality by just seeing, touching, and sensing. Their freshness is confirmed when we marinate and cook them on a stove. The nice aroma that emits will give the final revelation of whether the fish is fresh or not. Today, the fish has no aroma. It may be coming from Gujarat. Today, the body of the fish looks more like a sludge. Though the fish remains very stiff today, it has no strength.

The knowledge of what makes a fresh fish is constituted as an outcome of women's lived experiences, and freshness as a quality is enacted differently through the fish supply chain.[42] The entangled lives of women who sold fish and those who cooked fish also reveal how they continually observe and assess freshness while performing fish-making practices such as cleaning, grinding, cooking, smelling, and eating. This freshness was earlier assessed through local knowledge and shared conversations co-produced between the Mukkuvar women and the Nair women. These days, media reports on the adulteration of fish add new freshness discourses.

Nevertheless, the knowledge of fish freshness is not fixed, objective, or absolute, and it is more than socially constructed by humans.[43] It results from humans' and fish bodies' complex and nonlinear entanglements.[44] One (human) body without the other (fish) body cannot be turned into freshness; here, knowledge is the effect of a collective sensory mode by active bodies turning to fish freshness.[45] The freshness of fish is assessed not only by how it looks, feels, and smells but also by highlighting the lively materiality embedded in the qualities of fish.[46] Translated through women's embodied knowledge and practices, a dead fish becomes alive again through its aroma, colour, and taste, which is its freshness.

Unearthing the messy labyrinths of fish-making

For most women in this Nair Taravad, cooking becomes a responsibility after marriage, precisely if they move to their in-laws' homes. Otherwise, their cooking as everyday practice starts only when their mother and grandmother stop cooking. In

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42 M. Truninger, J.A. Baptista, D.M. Evans, P. Jackson, and N.C. Nunes, 'What is a Fresh Fish? Knowledge and Lived Experience in the United Kingdom and Portugal', in E. Probyn, K. Johnston, and N. Lee (eds), *Sustaining Seas: Oceanic Space and the Politics of Care.* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 87–98.
43 E. Probyn, *Eating the ocean*.
44 Ibid.
45 M. Truninger, 'What is a Fresh Fish?', 91.
46 Ibid.

most households I visited, I observed that the elderly mothers were still cooking food for the family. The younger women in the family essentially assisted their mothers with the cooking, such as cleaning fish, cutting vegetables, and washing vessels. According to a woman in her late fifties,

> I was in the fifth standard when I learned to cook fish. However, we will take up cooking fully when we are around forty years old. Till then, grandmothers and mother used to cook.

However, women could be exposed to a different environment than above, especially if they live with their in-laws. A woman in her early forties said:

> I had to move to my in-laws' house after my marriage as no one could take care of them. Nevertheless, my mother-in-law never allowed me to cook, since she felt I did not know how to cook, and her sons and grandson may not be happy with my cooking. She never trusted me. However, I began to cook regularly after her death.

When it comes to cooking anchovy, women share several constraints. A tiny fish requires more time and patience to be cleaned and cooked. A woman said:

> Working women prefer something other than netholi as cleaning takes much time and effort. Some days, it is backbreaking. Therefore, we do not want to buy it if we must cook fish. Before marriage, my mom or grandma used to do the cooking.

Apart from the hard labour and pain involved in cleaning and cutting fish, women shared that men's preferences for the big fish were a key determining factor that shaped their decisions to avoid anchovy. Most women recollected that they liked to eat small fish like anchovies and sardines when they were children. Earlier, women used to go to the local fish market. Now, men go to the market and therefore buy what they like. Women buy only when vendors bring it to their homes. Still, they go by the men's preferences. A woman who lives with her parents and three married younger sisters shared:

> We are all netholi lovers: my sisters, mom, and grandma. But the men like only the big fish. My dad, brother and even my husband like the big fish. My husband does not eat netholi curry if it is cold. He needs them fresh and hot-hot. Also, if we have netholi for two consecutive days, he will be upset. He needs variety. Before marriage, we used to buy netholi daily, which was also affordable compared to the big fish.

Amidst these conversations, one among the sisters reflected:

> When women are together [in the absence of the men], we will try to recreate those netholi days …

The youngest sister chipped into the conversation:

> Today is a fast-moving life, and men demand things faster. Cleaning netholi is very difficult and time-consuming. So only when there is time we buy netholi. Now our mom breaks her back, and that too cooking for all the men. Buying netholi complicates our lives today in many ways. When men buy netholi, we will scold them. So, they also do not buy.

The whole discourse on which fish to buy also signified a class discourse, where *netholi* is the lowest in the hierarchy of fish preferred. Even if they get tuna daily, people will exclaim,

'What a nice tuna! It Is cheaper, too.'

As the size changes, the tone and emotions do change.

'Oh, No! Sardine again! Netholi again!'

Only on the first day after a very long dry spell, if they get *netholi*, people will shout excitedly,

'There is netholi today.'

However, anchovies will be shunted out for some big fish very soon, either the next day or week. A woman commented,

> If we buy netholi consecutively for the third day, our men and neighbours will sarcastically ask, 'Is it netholi even today'? So, we scold our men if they buy netholi and come home.

On a humorous note, Levi mentions that this animosity between women and anchovies started very early in human history.[47] Ironically, I observed that while men are reluctant to have anchovies regularly from their wives' homes, the '*netholi* fry' was the most favoured dish for those men who visited the highway restaurants or the bar.

A woman from a low-income family said *netholi* was once upon a time poor people's fish. Nevertheless, today, only the rich can buy fish, including anchovies or sardines.

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47 S.C. Levi, 'Men who Love Anchovies: Living with Women who Do Not. *Medium*, 23 February 2020. Accessed at https://scl-57276.medium.com/men-who-love-anchovies-ee66f03c35e7

Though most of us would love to have the netholi fry as snacks like banana chips, we cannot always afford that. So, the poor and joint families have netholi only with rice, while some of our rich neighbours may have it as a snack.

Yet another middle-class woman countered this view,

Once upon a time, the netholi would have been poor people's fish. However, now the question is, who are the poor today? Are there any such families today? The minimum price for a big fish is Rs.100, while small ones like netholi cost a minimum of Rs. 50. Even then, the so-called 'poor' people buy the big fish.

Some women also saw metaphorical connections in the transitions of anchovies and people in the Nair Taravad. One woman said:

Earlier, when we used to buy netholi, we used to get a mix of small fish, snails, and sand. However, today, we have only one species, and it is very clean. This change is like the change in our families. They and we have moved away from joint families to nuclear families! ... Moreover, with joint families, we had the privilege of having small and big fish, smaller ones for us women and the big ones for men. Now the options have become limited.

An entrepreneurial woman concluded her interview by saying:

Working women today do not have time to clean. All work must be easy and quick. Easy labour. The present generation is still being prepared to work hard. This attitude also affects family relations. The youngsters try to avoid whatever is challenging, including relationships. Through learning to cook anchovy, just by the prolonged act of picking and plucking the head and tail of the fish, women used to learn to be cautious as well as exercise patience with our circumstances. There will be many fish; therefore, one needs to exercise patience to pick them one by one and clean them; there will be lots of sand, and cleaning is difficult. If we ever got distracted, a crow could snatch away the fish, and our mothers would scold us. Therefore, we used to remain alert always.

Reflecting on her own relations with fish-making, an elderly woman said:

We need to learn from the small acts of engaging with netholi. Through fish-making, our mothers and grandmothers gave us care and love, and we were privileged to receive them. Fish-making is about care-giving and care-receiving. Further, by engaging with netholi, we also become aware of our strengths – tolerance, alertness, and compassion. These qualities are

required today; our children have become increasingly impatient, greedy, and arrogant. Perhaps, all life practices should begin with netholi.

Discussion

There are multiple dominating knowledge systems within a Nair Taravad showcasing diverse lived realities and aspirations of Nair men and women, young and old. A humble attempt is made in this paper, guided by the discursive practices of fish-making, to unearth the agency and constraints of Nair women in a complex world of matrilineality, modernity, and global environmental change. One needs to be aware that within the Taravad, the knowledge claims of different actors are situated, varied and intersectional. These are evident from the different knowledge claims given in the earlier sections of this paper. Though varied and situated in their construction, these knowledge claims and contestations are often an expression against the dominant patriarchal traditions and worldviews embedded and entangled deep in a matrilineal society.

Throughout their fish-making practices, the Nair women are never detached observers. Through fish-making, each woman imagines herself and how she wants others to see her as a capable actor within and outside the premises of the Nair Taravad. Each of these women is aware of their unique social position in a larger network of relations and obligations. The differences and contradictions across multiple voices and social positions of each of the Nair women in this paper constitute their situated knowledge. While the social position of each Nair woman shapes the fish-making practices, these practices also in turn shape women's social position within the messy labyrinths of the Nair Taravad. Their social encounters signify the dynamic nature of their everyday life experiences, often constrained or enabled by the nature of relationships within their social worlds. Nevertheless, these Nair women strive to preserve some normative consensus and control over their existing social arrangements.

Fish-making mediated through the anchovy showcases how women actively learn with, do with, make with, and become with each other tied together in sympoiesis.[48] Learning to cook fish such as the anchovy is also being attentive to micro-life phenomena. Attentiveness leads to a co-constitution or becoming with the other rather than focusing on self or the other in a binary manner.[49] It is with these tiny marine beings that the Nair women thus foster a closer relationship. Fish-making enables these women to negotiate the world by listening to, noticing, and acting upon it; creating new forms of knowledge and practice. Gender and environment are mutually constituted, entailing different responsibilities.[50] Possibilities arise to become attentive to complex histories of entanglements if we realise that humans become

48 V. Bozalek, A. Bayat, D. Gachago, S. Motala, and V. Mitchell, 'A Pedagogy of Response-ability,' in V. Bozalek, R. Braidotti, T. Shefer, and M. Zembylas (eds), *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthumanist, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 97–112.

49 Ibid.

50 A. Nightingale, 'The Nature of Gender', 170.

only one of many participants in making liveability.[51] We must see all encounters as diverse beings emerging out of entangled relationships, which fundamentally involve networks of human and nonhuman phenomena.[52]

At a far deeper level, the awareness portrayed by Nair women in this paper is based on each of their experiential knowledge signifying the interconnectedness of their lives with the anchovy and thereby the Nair Taravad in itself is located within what Spretnak and Capra refer to as the cyclical processes of nature.[53] Such awareness also finds meaning in nurturing specific relationships of care, where shared conversations and storytelling of people in a more-than-human world are represented. The anchovy, the tuna, the small fish, the big fish, and the humans are all entangled in these storytelling practices. Nevertheless, women's everyday life performances are situated in a grey area between nature and culture.[54] The structures of control that govern their situation and resistance are plural and discursive.[55] In this regard, the Nair caste has always been a source of paradigm and paradox.[56] Kerala's modernity is shaped today by the subversion of caste-based social order through gendered binaries, where caste and gender are relegated to the private sphere.[57] In their entirety, social, economic, and political changes over the 19th and early 20th centuries have indeed transformed Nair women's identity, security, and autonomy,[58] leading to the gradual adoption of patriarchal practices forever changing women's status within the Taravad.[59]

Jeffrey believes that the new modernity that has shaped the Kerala development model has constrained Nair women's autonomy.[60] Women live like a 'modern-yet-valuing-tradition' kind of people.[61] Though they may own property such as a house and land or other earned income opportunities, men remain the dominant decision makers in the Taravad.[62] Further, women are confined to the private sphere and responsible for biological reproduction, childcare, and continuation of certain ritualistic practices,[63] including fish-making. They have some degree of bargaining power within the household on economic affairs and their children's education and marriage. Any active participation of women in the public sphere is accepted only as long as they fulfil their 'domestic' roles.[64]

Cooking and eating can be seen as feminist resistance or as signs of oppression. Women actively relate to food for better or for worse, and food contributes in

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51 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 263.
52 S.A. Webb, 'What Comes after the Subject? Towards a Critical Posthumanist Social Work', in V. Bozalek and B. Pease (eds). *Post-Anthropocentric Social Work: Critical Posthuman and New Materialist Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2021), 104–144.
53 C. Spretnak, and F. Capra, *Green Politics* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1984), xvi.
54 N. Kumar, and U. Sanyal, 2020. 'Introduction: The Politics and Culture of Food – South Asian Women and their Agency', in U. Sanyal and N. Kumar (eds), *Food, Faith and Gender in South Asia: The Cultural Politics of Women's Food Practices*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 1–28.
55 Ibid.
56 M.A. Moore, 'A new look'.
57 S. Harikrishnan, *Social Spaces and the Public Sphere*.
58 R. Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance.*
59 S. Arun, *Development and Gender.*
60 R. Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala Became 'a Model'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).
61 J. Devika, 'Development and Gender Capital in India: Change, Continuity, and Conflict in Kerala', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/00220388.2018.1556440.
62 S. Arun, *Development and Gender.*
63 Ibid.
64 S. Harikrishnan, *Social Spaces and the Public Sphere*, 130.

innumerable ways to their power and victimhood, happiness, and suffering.[65] Food empowers people only when household norms do not constrain it, and the repressive symbol becomes emancipatory.[66] In contrast, food could be a forceful symbol of keeping women inside the domestic boundaries. Various obligations also frame such domesticity: to prepare meals that are perfectly and punctually 'hot-hot'. Further, serving one's husband must come naturally to these women rather than due to men's requests.[67] Preferences about food, preparations, and serving are apparent from the conversations in the previous section. These preferences and mandates are premised on the 'taste' and 'ideals' of the men, not women's convenience, aspirations, or desires. The internalised belief that women should always put the needs of their husbands and their families before their own is the product of a patriarchal mindset that begins in the kitchen.[68]

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to understand women's life practices and entanglements in a Nair Taravad through the lens of a fish, the anchovy. Reflecting on the autoethnographic trajectory that this study undertakes, some crucial implications can be outlined. For those participants of the study who are still deeply entangled with the lives of anchovies, these reflective conversations were moments to showcase their concerns and empathy towards a depleting and decaying oceanic environment. For the rest of the participants who had moved away from the lifeworld of anchovies in the quest for new food-making practices embedded with modernity, the shared conversations provided meaningful opportunities to reflect and reconnect with their entangled, nostalgic past. For some women, anchovies are a way back to the 'motherlines', the bridge between the older generations of less educated homemakers and the younger generations of educated working women.[69] For others, their knowledge of fish and fish making is their primary resource to exercise their agency over other members of their families to decide what to buy, cook, and eat (and what not to). Locating oneself in such knowledge-sharing practices also enables us to partially comprehend the plural and heterogeneous nature of knowledge systems that shape our everyday being and becoming.[70]

While the Nair men merely enjoy and vociferously exercise social power sustained by patriarchy, women possess their own agency, too, which is often not overtly recognised. Not only are inequalities between men and women a consequence of environmental issues, but gender is also a cause of environmental change because

65 N. Kumar, and U. Sanyal, 'Introduction: The Politics and Culture of Food – South Asian women and Their agency', 3.
66 S. Gupta, 'A Taste of Patriarchy: Unpacking Three Films Through the Metaphor of Food', *Feminism in India,* 19 January 2023, Accessed at https://feminisminindia.com/2023/01/19/a-taste-of-patriarchy-unpacking-three-films-through-the-metaphor-of-food/
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 S. Sarkar, 'Religious Recipes: Culinary Motherliness of Feasts and Fasts in India', in U. Sanyal and N. Kumar (eds), *Food, Faith and Gender in South Asia: The Cultural Politics of Women's Food Practices*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 73–91.
70 W. Srang-Iam, 'De-contextualized Knowledge Situated Politics: The New Scientific–local Politics of Rice Genetic Resources in Thailand', *Development and Change*, 44, 1, 2013, 1–27.

gender is inextricably linked to how environments are produced.[71] Gendered capitalist relations permeate women's lives at every level, where their knowledge and identities are mediated through their relationship with men (fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands, sons, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, male fish vendors).[72] Both capitalism and patriarchy have impacted Nair women – anchovy entanglements.

In today's globalised capitalist world, these little fish and other marine organisms disturb the classifications of what is edible and for whom or what.[73] In the global fisheries value chain, these fish are fed to fish, become animal food, and are 'reduced' to become health supplements for the wealthy.[74] Anchovies today are not available regularly at local markets. Instead, they are available in malls, supermarkets, highway restaurants, and bars. As a capitalist commodity, anchovies are carefully packed and sorted, with no one having any idea under what conditions they were caught, cut, and cleaned. They have no connection to the people who earlier admired and exchanged them. They are just an inventory/asset from which corporations can profit.[75] Anchovies are translated into objects for sale, bearing no relation to the personal networks that shape their becoming from the oceans to the plate. Similarly, the lives of women who sold or cooked fish are translated simultaneously inside and outside capitalist value chains as cheapened, objectified labour. Both humans and nonhumans are subsumed into a logic of commodification and consumption, sabotaging any possibility for sustainable futures.[76]

In these broader contexts, the stories told by the Nair women on their subjective experiences and situated practices of fish-making impart specific meanings to their everyday entanglements with anchovies and other non-humans. To conclude, a Nair woman's narration sums up these concerns.

> There is a sense of loss in all aspects of life today. Our lives have changed. Everyone is in a mad race today, running hither and thither. The anchovies and sardines have run to some other coasts. Men are running behind, making money. Our sea has become warmer and more polluted. One day, we will not get this fish; Only then will we realise what we are missing.

71 A. Nightingale, The Nature of Gender, 166.
72 B. Neis, 'Introduction', in B. Neis, M. Binkley, S. Gerrard, and M.C. Maneschy (eds), *Changing Tides: Gender, Fisheries and Globalisation* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2005), 1–13.
73 E. Probyn, *Eating the Ocean*, 129-30.
74 Ibid.
75 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom.*
76 R. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).