

## Myth as a Yardstick of Morality in T.S.Pillai's *Chemmeen*

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**Abstract--** T.S. Pillai, is known as a revolutionary writer for his creative vigour, whose writings exhibits the realism of the fishing community in the novel *Chemmeen*. The novel is a melancholic classical love story of Karuthamma and Pareekutty; whose love is drifted and washed away because of their dissimilar class and religious setup; Karuthamma being a Hindu from a fishing community and Pareekutty being a Muslim their love is at stake. T.S.Pillai also focuses on the recurring myth in the novel, through which the writer had laid the framework for this novel. T.S.Pillai had put forward an enormous task in aggregating all the mythical and ancient beliefs which stand as a yardstick in measuring the morality of an individual. This paper focuses on all the ancient norms, beliefs and myth followed by the fishing community in Kerala and also brings out the inequality vested on women by using age old myths which is practised on woman and not on men.

**Keywords—**Myth, Morality, Fishing Customs and religion, ecofeminism.

### I.INTRODUCTION

T.S. Pillai in his novel *Chemmeen* brings out the biography of the Fisher folk of Kerala. In his *The Story of My Chemmeen*, he says “I was planning to write...Many of my friends assumed that it would deal with the lives of fishermen; that it would be about the coalition of fisher folk and would stir up unrest and revolution in their minds”(Chemmeen 240). The novel was originally written in Malayalam and was later on translated into many languages including Chinese, Vietnamese and so on. One serious complication which the translated work faces is

its loss of ethnicity when it is being translated into foreign languages very few translators like Lakshmi Holstorm, Anita Nair and so on work so hard to direct the essence of native language without alternating.

However the English translation of *Chemmeen* by Anita Nair stands the best, though it is in the second language, the essence of Malayalam is never shattered this credit it entirely entrusted to her meticulous translation. Nair felt it completely tedious to translate this classic love lore and she completed the novel by the end of fourth year, such is her dedication. This paper focuses on the marine culture and rituals followed by the fishermen of Kerala and the recurring mythical beliefs which are intended to subjugate the women folk alone by sparing the male folk and also throws light on the religious and caste tensions.

### **Myth and Culture:**

India is the Land of myths which is proclaimed to be ideal and people have a very strong belief on myths and their rituals whereas every nook and corner of the country is associated with specific myths according to their respective places. The coastal areas of India are predominant with their myths and rituals which are seen to be associated with the sea. In general, myth is something which is deeply in accordance with the society that people live in, Laurence Coupe in his book *Myth, The New Critical Idiom* states the Warner's definition with respect to myth and society as follows: "Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context - they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others" (Coupe 189).

The coastal people of Kerala assert that they are the descendants of the sage Vyasa (The Marine Hindu Fisher Folk- Some Ethnographic Notes 577), the son of sage Parahar and deriving this evidence from Mahabharata as stated in the book *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* written by Kavita Kane where the description goes on as, The sage was once taken to the shore by a beautiful black lady named Kali from the fisher folk, he was smitten by the beauty of her and impregnated her with the baby boy Vyasa, " 'The boy[sage Vyasa] will grow up to be a very famous sage and will bring you [Kali] great glory' " (Kané 19). This is how the generation of the fisher folk begun from the heir of Kali and sage Parahar.

The fisher folk of Kerala are divided into five categories they are: i) *Arayans* ii) *Valakkarans* iii) *Mukkavans* iv) *Marakkans* and v) *Patanans* (The Marine Hindu Fisher Folk- Some Ethnographic Notes 577), within this sections of people they have decided who were allowed to go boating and fishing; and who were not, “Only *Valakkaran* is allowed to own boats and nets. In fact in the east the protector of the shore, the Shore Master would permit only the *Valakkaran* to buy the boats and nets” (*Chemmeen* 31).

The fisherman constitute their strong economic and social setup, every shore has a shore master who is considered to be the master of the sea, the fishermen worked under him. It was customary to ask permission from the Shore Master before initiating any auspicious occasion like buying boats and nets; and inviting the Shore Master for the marriage “The Shore Master has a great deal of power” (*Chemmeen* 32). In the novel *Chemmeen* the fisherman Punyan wanted to know the offering which were to be done to the Shore Master before going to the sea for fishing, Raman explains’ “Seven shags of tobacco and fifteen rupees”( *Chemmeen* 32) were to be given. During the marriage between Palani and Karuthamma, the bride price amount has to be given as determined by the Shore Master only, “It was time to pay the bride price. The amount was to be fixed by the Shore Master. Only after that would the marriage ceremony begin” (*Chemmeen* 111).

T.S. Pillai herein brings the religious and caste tensions in the novel which prevailed during that time. The religious discrimination is seen when the love bond between Karuthamma and Pareekutty is broken on the ground that Karuthamma is a Hindu fisherwoman and Pareekutty is a Muslim man, this religious indifference is given by Chakki (Mother of Karuthamma), “Child, you are a Muslim. And we are fisher folk. You were childhood playmates and once you may have played together on these shores. But that was then. We will marry her off to a suitable fisherman. And you must marry a good Muslim girl” (*Chemmeen* 52).

The tensions of caste discrimination were seen in the novel at two instances, firstly when Karuthamma was asked for marriage with Palani, Chakki questions, “What is his caste?” (*Chemmeen* 86) to which Chembankunju replied “He is human. And a worker of the sea” (*Chemmeen* 86). The second instance is during the marriage of Karuthamma and Palani, the people who attended the marriage were not fully aware of Palani’s caste, so they left without eating the marriage feast, “Some women went away without eating. They were unsure of Palani’s caste and hence were reluctant to eat at the feast” (*Chemmeen* 115).

**Feminising Nature:**

Literature has been correlating nature with woman in order to present nature in a serene and polite manner this technique of associating feminine attributes with nature and also comparatively equating female with nature is called ecofeminism, “ecofeminism” in the words of V.Davison is that “women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional and the particular” (Davison 9).

There were various poets who wonderfully feminised nature through their work of art as Gilpin puts in his work *Observations on the River Wye* states, “Nature is always great in design. She is an admirable colorist also/and harmonizes tints with infinite variety and beauty” (Gilpin 1789). The productivity and fertility of nature is compared parallelly with woman in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* he versifies as:

So on her farers, and to border comes  
  
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,  
  
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,  
  
.....  
  
Of goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruits  
  
Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue” (Milton 131-3, 147-8).

One striking attribute which T.S.Pillai applied in this novel is that he has fused nature with woman; he has associated nature with the sea, as ‘*Kadal amma*’ (mother sea) the reason for giving sea a motherly figure is because the fisher folk’s livelihood is dependent on the sea, it is the sea that gives them productivity and life and they believe that mother sea will not let them rot and demise, “The mother of the sea has been good to us, daughter[Karuthamma]” (*Chemmeen* 53).

T.S.Pillai has also brought in the biological representation of female .ie. the menstruation cycle in accordance with the sea, “All of a sudden the colour of the sea changed. A denseness. The waters of the sea were

tainted red. It was the time of the year for the mother of the sea” (*Chemmeen* 64). It is during this time that the sea is left untouched because it is understood to be her [sea] resting period so no fishermen is allowed to go into the sea and disturb her, but some greedy and materialistic fishermen like Chembankunju took this time as an advantage to gain more money while other fishermen remain at the shore, this is where the exploitation of nature happens by man. The Patriarchal society has an unrelenting habit of subjugating and discriminating female and whatever that are feminised may it be land or may it be sea to take in totality, nature and this is what ecofeminists assert.

### **Mythically subjugating Women:**

The novel *Chemmeen*, is build upon one strong view point stating that a fisher woman should always remain chaste in order to keep her fisherman alive, this is elaborated by Chakki to Karuthamma:

On a mere plank of wood, the first fisherman had rowed through waves and currents a point beyond the horizon. While on the shore his faithful wife had stood facing the west, waiting. A storm blew up and churned the sea. Whales with their mouths gaping open gathered. Sharks beat the water into a frenzy with their tails. The undertow dragged the boat into a whirlpool. But he miraculously survived all these dangers ...How did all of this happen? Only because a chaste wife stood on the seaside, praying waiting for her husband’s safe return (*Chemmeen* 08).

The myth that chaste woman is responsible for the life of her husband, is strongly enthused in the minds of the fisherwoman. During the marriage ritual, Karuthamma is being instructed “the religion of wifhood” (*Chemmeen* 102), by the neighbourhood woman they say, “Our men live in the sea where the waves rise and fall, daughter!”(*Chemmeen* 103) and if the woman fails to be chaste the old sea ditties state, “Her fall from the grace caused the waves to rise as high as mountain and climb onto the shore. Dangerous serpents foamed and frothed as they slithered on the sands. Sea monsters with cavernous mouths chased the boats to swallow them whole” (*Chemmeen* 104).

It was in the fisherwoman’s community to pray for her husband alone but Karuthamma was caught between two men in her life; the one whom she loved more than herself, and the one to whom she had to be a faithful wife. But she failed, as a lover by marrying Palani, and failed as a chaste wife by loving Pareekutty even after she was

married and was a mother of Palani's child, and by therein the myth that the life of fisherman is to be at stake if the fisherwoman is unchaste becomes true in the novel:

The water rose sky-high and cascaded. The sea became a cave...Palani lay on his belly over it [the boat]...Caught in the cross-current, the boat ...sank...Some of the fishermen who had woken in the night said that there was a huge haul in the deep seas. The waves had come as far as the doorsteps of some houses. Some sea snakes were seen on the white sands (*Chemmeen* 238).

Out of her love towards Pareekutty she forgot to pray for her husband's safe return and in contrast she prayed for the life of Pareekutty, this was how the kismet fell on the lives of Pareekutty, Karuthamma and Palani. T.S.Pillai illustrates through this novel, that how important is myth related to the moral status of women especially, hence Myth becomes a yardstick to measure the chastity of women.

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