

An Archetypal Approach to Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*

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Introduction

One of the most renowned Malayalam novels *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai has been translated into more than nineteen languages. The theme of the novel is a myth among the fishermen community along the coastal of Kerala State in the Southern India. The myth is about chastity of women. When a married fisherwoman was infidel, her husband was taken into the sea by 'Kadalamma', the Sea Goddess (literally means Mother Sea). Here the sea is mythologized as 'Kadalamma' a generous goddess to the fisheries and to scare the people who is adulterous. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai wrote this beautiful tragic novel with this myth of the fisher folk using the Sea as an archetypal symbol. Generally the sea is well thought-out as the mother of all life, spiritual mystery and infinity, death and rebirth, timelessness and eternity. These assumptions are being found in the novel *Chemmeen*.

Similar kind of myth is also found in Greek Literature. The following example from the criticism of Fiona McHardy clearly shows the myth of *Odyssey* that "The idea that those who have displeased the gods will be drowned while voyaging at sea is apparent in a number of myths. The punishment is associated in particular with those who have insulted the gods in some way, but it is also connected to sexual offences"(6). Similar myth is clearly found in *Chemmeen* too. The following myth in *Chemmeen* clearly echoes that of *Odyssey*. While a fisherman goes to the sea for getting fortune, his faithful wife, facing the west should stand on the shore and wait for her husband's safe return. If she isn't loyal to her man, Mother Sea will get angry with her and she'll take the life of the woman's husband and will send many venomous creatures like snakes to the shore and there will be an enormous destruction to her place with her nature force. Karuthamma questions Nallapennu about a woman who had been punished by the Mother Sea in the shore there before. Nallapennu answers Karuthamma that there had been so in most tales of the old sea deities, which tell that when woman fell from grace caused the waves to rise as high as a mountain and climb onto the shore. "Dangerous serpents foamed and frothed as they slithered on the sands. Sea monsters with yawning mouths chased the boats to swallow them whole. It was an old story"(104).

The folk song often reminds Karuthamma about the myth of the sea shore. Pareekutti, the Muslim lover of Karuthamma also sings every night about the fallen woman who lived on this shore once. Karuthamma wakes up in sudden and she forgets herself and the rest whenever she happens to hear that song. She loves Pareekutti and his song too. She becomes a slave to the song of

Pareekutti. The song represents the memories of their love. House is considered as the symbol of power structure in the society. House as a symbol, plays a pivotal role in the lives of all human beings in search of Identity. Likewise, in the novel *Chemmeen*, Chemban Kunju and his daughter long to own a house. Chemban Kunju, the greedy father of Karuthamma plans to buy a new land to build a house for him after buying a boat and net of his own. In the same way, after getting married Karuthamma also proposes her husband that they should also have their own house. The archetype of the family set up is clearly depicted here however the married couples' desires to make their own identity in the society. Blue is usually positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, spiritual purity, security. The common belief of the fisher, when the colour of the sea is normal there will not be any problem but if it is changed, it is a bad omen. The change in the sea is portrayed beautifully in *Chemmeen*: "All of sudden the colour of the sea changed. A Denseness. The waters of the sea were tainted red. It was that time of the year for the mother sea. For some time hereafter she would be unable to bless them. The sea would be barren"(64). When the sea turns red other fishermen stay ashore believing that the Mother Sea is menstruating. Red stands for blood, sacrifice, violent passion and disorder. Black (darkness) signifies disorder, mystery, the unknown, death, primal wisdom, unconscious, evil and melancholy. When Palani, husband of Karuthamma goes to the sea with anger, the bad sign of black is portrayed as follows: "From the west, a giant wave that covered the horizon came rolling. He felt a great desire to cut through the heart of that wave and go across. But the wave.....Calm. But the sea was tinged with black" (230).

The entire life of the fishermen is set at the backdrop water and generally the water stands for the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. Water is the most common symbol for the unconscious. As the water (sea water) is the living source of the fishing folk, the fishermen like Chemban Kunju and Palani unconsciously think of water and their catch. Serpent (snake or worm) signifies the symbol of temptation in Christianity; evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery. The symbol of destruction is given in the story of Palani when he moves towards the deep sea and the poisonous snakes enter into his boat. This is depicted in the novel through the following lines: "Sea snakes slithered into his boat. They were gliding over the silver talismans on the blue expanse. At the edge of the boat, they stood on their tails, dancing. And then they slithered back into the water again. Two snakes coiled around each other within the boat"(230). At the end of the novel some sea snakes move on the sea shore and the waves had come as far as the doorsteps of some houses. This happens after the reunion of the lovers Karuthamma and Pareekutti.

The sea waves signify the unlimited power of nature. When Palani is rowing his boat into the sea with pride, he is drowned by a giant wave. Whenever man tries to compete with Mother Nature out of his pride, he faces failure. The wave

could be a tool of 'Kadalamma' and it could be sent to stop his interior sea voyage in order to stop the destruction. But men do not realise the sign of nature now a days. The fish as a symbol of life, denotes man's struggle with nature. Palani baits a shark and he puts all his strength to control it amidst the sea. He struggles until his death into the whirlpool. He speaks to the shark and he becomes mad on the catch. Similar sequence is being found in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, the old man also goes alone into the sea and catches Marlin, a big fish and struggles with it. Santiago speaks with the fish in order to motivate himself. Likewise Palani in *Chemmeen* speaks with the shark when it draws him into the whirlpool. Palani shouts; "Stop it! It isn't time yet for you to take me to the sea mother's palace!...Ha... that is the way, my boy!"(235). But this speech is the outcome of the fear on death. Hemingway says through the character of Santiago that man is not made for defeat; a man can be destroyed but not defeated. In the same way even though Palani dies in the whirlpool, he is not defeated by the shark but his bait kills the shark at the end of the novel.

The boat and the net symbolise pride. After owning a boat and a net, Chemban Kunju becomes prejudiced. Having all wealth in a sudden, he forgets everything around him including his family, friends and Pareekutti who helped him to buy the boat. But when Pareekutti asks Chemban Kunju to sell his fish to him, Chemban Kunju demands money from him. Greed catches him tightly. All the people including his wife Chakki begin to hate him because of his insatiability. He feels shame on going to sea in other's boat.

The payment of bride price is in the Arayan community in the fisher folk. It should be paid to the bride's Shore Master which he determines it. Usually the bride groom will be given dowry by the bride's family. But it is just the opposite that the readers could find in *Chemmeen*. The capability of the bride groom will be calculated with this bride price. This will show whether he is in good economic condition or not. The Shore Master will take his share from the money and the rest will go to the bride's family. This is their custom they follow during their marriage ceremony. It brings out the cultural understanding of a particular mother-rooted society. The readers also find this custom in the conversation of Karuthamma and Pareekutti which gives a double meaning. 'When you have a boat and nets, will you sell us the fish?'; 'If you give us a good price, we will (59).'-Here 'a good price' signifies the bride price. Indirectly their conversation is about their dream on marriage.

Both Karuthamma and Pareekutti are described with the symbolic significance of their dress code in the first chapter of the novel. As a Hindu Arayan community woman Karuthamma wears with a sheer mundu; Pareekutti, a Muslim man wearing a pair of trousers and a yellow shirt, with a silk handkerchief knotted around his throat and a tasselled cap. The appearance itself signifies that they both are from different controversial religions. The dress code symbolises the tradition and practices of each other.

Clouds and the stars take part in the novel and the stars (Arundhati, a guiding star of fishermen and symbol of chastity) are considered as the navigating tool for the fishermen to find the way of shore. But on Karuthamma's reunion with her lover, the stars are covered over by the dark clouds. Far from the shore Palani finds no stars in the sky and he loses his way. After the whirlpool draws Palani into the sea the clouds uncover the stars. "One star was visible. It was the star that fishermen navigated by. The fisherman's guiding light. But its radiance seemed to have dulled"(238).

Out at sea, Palani struggles with a huge shark he has baited and looks in vain and a giant whirlpool forms and waves become mountainous. He cries out to his wife (the fisherman's traditional guardian angel) to pray for him: "And so it was to her he was appealing for prayers as that first fisherwoman had prayed for the safe return of her husband"(237). But Karuthamma is in the arms of Pareekutti, and Palani is dragged down to the abode of the Sea Mother. Karuthamma and Pareekutti, the lovers also face the death by the sea at the end of the novel. The secret meeting of those lovers in the moonlight is often being found almost in all the literatures of the world. Their meetings take place at the moonlight. The only witness of their secret meeting is the moon. Their love also symbolizes the desire to realize the primordial, cosmic union of Shiva and Shakti. Shiva Purana not only praises Shiva as "manifested light" but also says that Shiva and Devi (or Shakti) are identical and inseparable as moonlight from the moon. So it is that Pareekutti and Karuthamma consummate their long-denied love by moonlight.

Using myth and symbols, the archetypal pattern in the novel *Chemmeen* leaves a moral caution to the people that they have to keep individual morality, self-discipline with self-control. Though the punishment of Sea Mother is terrible, the purpose is to lead the men in a good path. Finally there is a dilemma in among the readers of the myth that 'Is the chastity meant for only the women? Is not to men?'

Reference

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