WOMEN CHARACTERS IN CHEMMEEN – A RE-READING ON THE BASIS OF GENDER POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Gender plays a significant role in the formation of both men and women. But the term ‘Gender’ raises significant questions in relation to women as they are marginalized and discriminated in family and society. It is noted that women are forced to suppress their various emotions in a male-dominated society. Thakazhi in his novel ‘Chemmeen’ explicitly presents the sad predicament of fisherwomen in our society. He raises our social consciousness against the unjust system that victimizes women. The first instance of independence of women is dramatically portrayed the subaltern image of Karuthamma. While all the other women in the novel accept the boundaries created by men, Karuthamma questions the system through her life. She fights against those who suppresses her dreams and strives to fulfill them through death.

KEYWORDS: Gender Politics, marginalization, Family, Society, social consciousness, Sacrifice, oppression, poverty, Orthodox, male chauvinism.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s Chemmeen is set in a fishing village in South Kerala. Chemmeen couples the lives and dreams of ordinary people with their aspirations and superstitions. This is the story of subaltern people; depicting their traditions, age old beliefs, and the sufferings portrayed as a way of life with deep and significant moral (Santha IV). At the same time, the novel directs the greed of man to a tragic end. We read:

The story itself is built upon one of their many superstitions: they believe that a wife who commits adultery while her husband is away at sea brings down the wrath of Kadalamma (Mother Sea) on the innocent man. Whether the notion, by itself, is too romantic to be believed is another question, but we know that the conviction which the realism of its atmosphere carries is powerful enough to persuade the reader to suspend any disbelief in its denouncement (Sachidanandan 294).
K. M. George raises a very valid question in the introductory remarks of his work, *Best of Thakazhi S. Pillai*: “It [Chemmeen] raises a fundamental question. What is chastity: does it mean loyalty to the husband or the lover? A woman in our society is forced to suppress her real feelings and live an artificial life” (14-15) he says. She is forced to suppress her emotions for the sake of the family, for the welfare of society, for the protection of age-old customs and traditions. Thus gender plays a major role in shaping her personality in family and in society. Women are always discriminated in society on the basis of gender. Their contributions for the development of family and society have been neglected in a male dominated society. As Tejinder Kaur notes in an edited work by T.S. Anand:

Women in Indian society as in almost all other societies of the world, though they constitute almost half of the world’s population, have not been treated on par with men in various spheres of human activity. They have been oppressed, suppressed, repressed, victimized and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunities for the fulfillment of their lives, despite the fact that they possess equal capacities, skills and intelligence, and work whole-heartedly for the development of their family (67).

As this is the situation this research paper examines how and why K. S. Pillai presents women in *Chemmeen* in the conventions of Gender Politics and how he addresses the universality of female suffering while introducing progressive notions of female conduct. Age-old values find ample space in the text, along with the superstitious beliefs and traditions of the fishermen community in Kerala. At the same time he novel shows the first instance of independence of females through the eyes of Karuthamma. While all the other women suffer under the ancient social system Karuthamma fights back against those who suppress her dreams.

**Women: symbols of silent suffering**

Throughout the novel Pillai presents his female characters with a compassionate understanding that a good number of them silently suffer oppressive and unfulfilling roles assigned by gender. Sometimes they question, argue, and quarrel, but in the end they subjugate themselves to the male. All the women live according to the duties assigned to them by their male counterparts. They lead marginal lives, as their primary role is that of the obedient and self-sacrificing wife. Chakki, Karuthamma, Nallapennu, Panchami (the young daughter of Chakki) and Pappikunju, the great Kandankoran’s widow (remarried to Chemban Kunju but Chemban renounces her) all suffer variously under male supremacy.

Chakki suffers a lot as Chemban Kunju’s wife; Karuthamma suffers as an obedient daughter and a weeping wife; Nallapennu suffers because of her poverty due to the irresponsible ways
of Achakunjju, whom she justly accuses him of squandering his earnings for drink; and Panchami the younger daughter of Chakki becomes an orphan with another orphan in her hands (the daughter of Karuthamma). The life of Pappikunjju becomes a tragedy after the death of her husband Kandankoran, from whom Chemban Kunju gets his first boat and whose lifestyle he dreams of imitating.

Karuthamma is another suffering woman who endures everything until the last moment of her life with some signs of rejuvenation in thought and action. Karuthamma as a representative of suffering women is subjected to the whims and fancies of her father. Though she loves someone she cannot actualize her dreams because of societal compulsions and the compulsions of her parents especially because of her mother. What “Manusmirti” speaks about the plight of women becomes actualized in Karuthamma: “in childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s and when her husband is dead under her son’s. She should not have independence” (qt. in Nubile, 21). It is always noted that the physical and psychological identity of women is defined and controlled by men.

Karuthamma: The New Woman

Karuthamma would today be considered a liberator of women. The way she behaves and speaks with boldness and truthfulness are specific indicators of her quality as a new woman. Karuthamma becomes a referendum in society for others to see as an example who questions the existing norms and taboos in society. The leading philosophy of the fisher folk, that “fishermen fought with the waves and currents of the sea single-handed…on the other side of the horizon, his chaste and pure wife sat on the shore praying steadfastly for the safety of her husband” and “the lives of men at sea are in the hands of the women on shore” have a strong impact in their life (Pillai 7-8). Millions have practised and lived this philosophy of life. Chakki, Karuthamma’s beloved mother, accepts it and practices the same in her life.

Though Karuthamma as a woman is subjugated to various pressures in society, her desire for freedom is seen on various occasions. Karuthamma dares to speak to Pareekutty at the beginning of the novel itself in a way that no woman in that seafront would ever dare to speak or laugh: “Karuthamma laughed and laughed until her eyes filled with tears. Out of breath, she said, “Kochumuthalali, don’t make me laugh so much” (4). What is there to laugh so much? Was it so amusing? The novel opens with their laugh and as a tragedy it ends with their death. The story is the sum total of the things happening in between these two ends. On
the one hand Karuthamma as a representative of all women folk challenges and questions society.

The money her father has borrowed from Pareekutty becomes a burden for Karuthamma. She genuinely desires and openly expresses her love for Pareekutty so much so that he wholeheartedly gives the money to Chemban Kunju; but in course of time her father’s unscrupulous nature becomes a burden for Karuthamma. From the very beginning itself Karuthamma questions the source of bundles of dried fish she finds in their home. Though Chakki gives an evasive answer she is not satisfied with it. So she asks her, “why can’t he keep them in his curing yard?” (15). Chemban Kunju plans the secret business with Pareekutty in such a way that he brings the bundles of dried fish to their home at night and sells it without anyone noticing it. In the entire seafront nobody comes to know how Chemban Kunju got so much money to buy a boat and net; for many it remains an elusive secret. Karuthamma hates her father and mother for being so heartless in their dealings with Pareekutty.

Her arguments are so philosophical that we wonder how she learnt such thoughts, “won’t the sea goddess be angry if you cheat men?” and “do you really mean to return the money? (19). “It was at midnight that you brought over the bundles of fish. Why didn’t you bring them over by day? This is the sort of thing which makes the sea god barren” (20) Her philosophy of life is entirely different from the traditional thinking of the ‘Mukkuva’ (fishermen) community. Karuthamma possesses a certain quality that has no parallel in the community. She represents the new woman who has the capacity to transform their living conditions for a better society. Her high thinking makes a difference in her mother’s attitude. Once she even asks her mother to steal the money from where her father has hidden it. She questions her mother’s perplexity in doing it, “are you afraid of doing it, mother?” (87). We also read, “A great change came over Karuthamma’s character. She had grown up. She had courage. With new determination she waited for a chance to talk to Pareekutty” (84).

Karuthamma doubts the validity of the arguments made by Chakki, who believes that a cloudy sea signals that the “anger of the goddess of the sea is roused” and it will destroy everything. She even reminds Karuthamma that “purity is the great thing,” it is the strength and wealth of the fishermen; but Karuthamma wonders, what about the purity of men? (9). Karuthamma asks the same question to Nallapennu; “Auntie, has there been on this seafront any fisherwoman who strayed off the path of righteousness?” Nallapennu considers it the law of the seafront but Karuthamma doubts whether it exists even today; “Today there isn’t that
purity… today the men, too, are like that” (94-95). Karuthamma’s questioning nature is the remarkable quality that sets her apart from all other women. “Karuthamma does not like to live in a taboo ridden society” (Naikar 153); this leads her to the thought of escaping her caste by accepting the religion of her lover.

Her strong will is seen when she threatens her mother: “I won’t consent [for marriage] unless that money is returned. Otherwise I shall kill myself. That is certain” (Pillai 83). Time and again various experiences in her life teach her to be a strong willed person, and, “a great change came over Karuthamma’s character. She had grown up. She had courage with new determination” (84). She threatens her mother, “I’m determined to tell father” that what he is doing is not correct. But her mother pleads with her not to do so. When Chemban Kunju plans to buy a second boat, Karuthamma is distressed; “give him back that money father”, she pleads with her father. Her thoughts and arguments further lead her to reveal the truth behind the monetary transactions, because she cannot carry the burden any more “I’m going to tell Father everything, everything – then I know he will find the money” (67). Thus she takes a revolutionary opposing stance against male dominance and her father’s heartless and fraudulent nature.

Though most of the women are bound by the chains of tradition related to the role of women among the fisherfolk, Karuthamma defies the world of gender-related and religious prejudices surrounding her. Karuthamma represents the “new woman” who lives independently following her own wishes and instincts. She is not afraid of what others think of her behaviour. She is an individual, modern woman who has freed herself from the burden of tradition. She does not care about what will happen to her child, her husband, her younger sister, or anyone. She decides to live her life; because she lives as she likes and her life is only hers. She breaks the chains of bondage created by society for women and defines a path of her own based on her wishes and dreams.

It is clear that in writing Chemmeen T.S. Pillai had a much larger goal in mind than to simply create a tragic love story: it is an apt eye opener to the political, social, religious life of Kerala’s ‘mukkuvan’ (fishermen) community, who have been marginalized from the main stream of the larger community. The novel clearly depicts the philosophy, beliefs and culture of the ‘mukkuvan’ community from a wider perspective. Though the novel allows the reader to live vicariously through the tragic life of Pareekutty and Karuthamma, T.S. Pillai critiqued the gender difference and male domination that existed in society as part of a wider gender inequality.
Conclusion: Suffering Leads to Universal Love

Women, especially fisherwomen, marginalized from the mainstream life have always been experiencing subjugation from their male counterparts. Their life is generally a static and stagnant one in connection with the roles assigned to them in society and in the family. Chemmeen, a novel of the 1960’s, brought about some small changes in the total outlook of women, especially among the fisherwomen. We find some bold steps taken by women to cross the forbidden territory. Karuthamma being a new woman takes a bold step forward towards freedom of expression and realizes that they are on equal terms with men at least in love; but she can prove it only in death. She is not afraid of being herself or loving freely. Breaking the laws pertaining to love is a way of questioning the existing authority and asserting one’s identity. She breaks the rules. She crosses the forbidden territory and tramples upon the laws that lay down who should be loved and how much. Pillai, while trying to capture the social strata and community experience of the subaltern community, also addressed the issues of women in society along with the universality of female suffering. Pillai took a revolutionary opposing stance by questioning the prevalent social system through Karuthamma, the new woman.

At times the novel serves as a caution to women not to be naive and at other times advises them to be in tune to the traditions of the society. As Michelle Mock Murton argues in her essay, Behind the ‘barred windows’: The Imprisonment of women’s Bodies and mind in Nineteenth –Century America, “although there were many movements to bring women into the forefront of society as a means of equal rights…political enfranchisement alone [could] not bring women to an equitable socioeconomic footing with men” (Pazhavila 2). As we understand from the novel and from our social background, women always become the victims of gender discrimination in a male dominated society where women merely play the role of a housekeeper or as they believed, the women on shore must be pure and chaste to guarantee the safety of their men on ‘Kadalamma’s (Goddess of the Sea) risky waters. As we read in the introductory part of the novel, poverty of the degree one finds here will be difficult for most in the Western world to imagine. In such regions, the prayer "May my children not know starvation" is literally meant and earnestly uttered. It is considered as the duty of women on the shore to ensure the safety of the men in the sea and at the same time to give food for all (Santha V).

Women were always supposed to follow the traditions imposed upon them by society, but Karuthamma, the new woman, questions this deceptive value system at least in her family. It
is through steadfast love and sheer determination that Karuthamma is eventually able to achieve exactly what she needs in order to feel fulfilled in her life. Because “she loved him… Pareekutty was hers and she his… in her heart of hearts she had no regrets… if she could give a man whose life she had crushed at least a moment’s happiness shouldn’t she grant it” (215).

As Guillamin Colette reminds us, “A woman is never anything but a woman, an interchangeable object with no other characteristic than her femininity, whose fundamental characteristic is belonging to the class of women” (qtd in Nubile, 104) it is very difficult to escape this categorization in a male dominated society. As a French feminist Colette again reminds that “women are doomed to belong to the class of women and they cannot escape this categorization in a male dominated world”. Guillamin believes that the specific nature of the oppression of women is caused by the “appropriation” of the class of women by the class of men, thus reducing women to “the state of material objects.” Guillamin points out that the class of women is underprivileged and it is exploited by men for their benefits. Gender difference and gender politics is rampant in Chemmeen with the theme of love entwined with male power for domination and control. Though the women in Chemmeen suffer variously, they suffer gracefully. Irrespective of their suffering they understand each other and accept them. Almost all the women suffer one way or other. Nallappennu looks after Chakki, Panchami, and Pappikutju. At the end of the novel Panchami stands looking at the vast horizon with an orphan girl child in her hand. They are not afraid of being themselves or loving freely; they symbolize universal love through suffering.

Works Cited