

SECURING THE MARINE WEALTH THROUGH SANCTIFYING THE SEA: A READING OF THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI'S *CHEMMEEN*

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Abstract: This paper focuses upon the belief systems of the natives of coastal Kerala in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel *Chemmeen* and explores how these practices act as major factor towards the protection of the marine life. Although viewed by the so called civilized section as backward, the indigenous people are the real care takers of the Nature, as their relationship is based on a profound spiritual connection which enables them to practice reverence, humility and reciprocity. Their culture constantly mingles with nature and they revere *Katalamma*, the sea goddess, as she is considered their food provider and ruling deity. This belief prevents the over exploitation of the marine life, thus creating a beautiful balance between the nature and man.

Key words: Indigenous fisher folk; *Katalamma*; sea goddess; sacred; ecospiritual; mechanized fishing.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Every man's perspective is subjective and one is always involved in the happenings around him and this idea according to Campbell has its roots in relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Campbell quotes Gary Zukav's words in *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, "there is no such thing as objectivity. We cannot eliminate ourselves from the picture. We are a part of nature, and when we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself" (Campbell 129) When the world dwells in a vacuum deliberately forgetting the wonders of creation, there exists a group of people, for whom the creation and its enigma means everything in their life. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel *Chemmeen* (Shrimp) portrays one such group, the fisher clan, who maintain a staunch bonding with the sea, upon which they depend for their existence. This paper deals with the indigenous fishermen's beliefs that are often misunderstood as myths and superstitions, but they act as a pillar to protect the marine life from being devoured extensively as it is done by the modern age mechanized fishing practices.

The lives of the fishermen community on the coastal Kerala is ruled by *Katalamma*, (*Katal* meaning sea and *amma* meaning mother in Malayalam) the sea goddess and the beliefs attached to it. Here Thakazhi erases the distinction between human and the nonhuman, one of the fundamental principles of deep ecology. The lives of the rural characters in the sea front are characterized by their deep contact with nonhuman nature and a distance from the conventional human society. Almost every action in their daily endeavour is governed by the customs and the traditions of the seafront. Hailed as a minute observer of human characters and society, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1914-1998), the father of modern Malayalam novel, chose ordinary people as the fit subjects for his narratives. Published in 1956 in Malayalam, *Chemmeen* became the first novel in Malayalam language to win the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958 and has been translated into more than thirty Indian and foreign languages. Its first English translation by Narayana Menon, published in 1962 is taken into consideration for this article.

2. THE FISHER FOLK AND THEIR FOOD PROVIDER:

Thakazhi, through *Chemmeen* brings out the raw life of people who share their entire livelihood with the sea whom they worship as *Katalamma*. Their life, which encompasses glad and sad moments associated with the nature of the sea, is attributed to their food provider. In a time of ecological crisis which has resulted in huge consequences for humanity and the earth system which is the result of a mechanistic world view and human exploitation of the earth, there exists one sect of people who possess a sacralized world view of which an ecological concept of religion and spirituality is part. The fisher folk have a direct consciousness and experience of the sacred in the ecology which serves them as a practical search to live sustainably from the sea's resources. They maintain a love for, connection to, and oneness with the sea goddess which they refer to as *Katalamma* with a realization that one's own wholeness or well-being is interdependent with the wholeness and well-being of the planet.

According to Gary Synder, the sacred is defined "as precisely that which helps us escape from this prison ego. It refers to that which helps take us out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe." At a time when people are at ease only when nature is "cut into a human quilt" (Sanders 186) Thakazhi has portrayed a picture of people who are ready to be governed by nature. *Chemmeen* has the quality of a fable in which the lives, the superstitions, the inner beliefs, the traditions and the sufferings of the community of fishermen are portrayed as a way of life with a deep and significant moral. The spiritual practices of the fishermen community can be taken as an

example for a reconceptualization of the human relationship with the nature around, as the natural resources are exploited without regard for the future survival. The spiritual tenet of deep ecology claims human species as a part of the earth and wholly repudiates anthropocentrism and in turn it has influenced the development of ecospirituality upon which the happenings in *Chemmeen* are built. A new name for a set of ideas that goes back a long way, ecospirituality, is based on the fundamental belief in the sacredness of Nature, Earth and the Universe.

The sea rules the lives of the fisher folk of Kerala. The fishing community is a distinctive group of people geographically located in the coastal areas and have their own distinct occupational methods. The people belonging to northern Malabar pursue different practices in fishing compared to people belonging to central Kerala, and towards the southernmost part of the coast, occupational methods still vary. But one thing which is common amidst all the differences is the sacredness attributed to the sea. To everyone, the sea goddess is *Katalamma*. Drawing their sustenance from it, they love and fear its mysterious depths, where lives the goddess of the sea, the all-seeing arbiter of their destinies. Her bounty goes to the good; for the faithless she unleashes her ferocious wrath to destroy them. Quoting Chardin who is thankful for the harsh realities of nature, which in turn makes man value things around, strikes a parallel to the conditions of the life of people portrayed by Thakazhi:

Hymn to Matter

Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock: You who yield only to violence, you who forces us to work if we would eat.

Blessed be you, universal matter, innumerable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars, and atoms and generations: you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards of measurements reveal to us the dimensions of God.

Without you, without your onslaughts, without your uprootings of us, we should remain all our lives inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant both of ourselves and of God.

You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you who resist us and yield to us, you who wreck and build, you who shackle and liberate, the sap of our souls, the hand of God, the flesh of Christ: it is you, matter, that I bless. (Chardin 63-64)

3. THE INDIGENOUS BELIEF SYSTEM:

When the fishermen in Thakazhi's *Chemmeen* have a rise in financial status, they do not attribute the gain to their hard work and well executed way of life. Instead they dedicate it to the sea goddess's blessing. When the protagonist Karuthamma's father Chembankunju, a fisherman who lives a life differently from those of the other men in his clan acquires enough money to buy a boat and net, he and his wife Chakki offer the gain to the *Katalamma* saying, "The sea goddess has blessed us." (*Chemmeen* 15) At the same time their daughter Karuthamma expresses her resentment as she is aware of her parents' plan to lend money from Pareekutti, a Muslim fish-trader, who unlike the other money lenders would not ask for any interest, let alone the capital, as Pareekutti and Karuthamma share an intimate relationship. "Won't the sea goddess be angry if you cheat men?" (*Chemmeen* 16) The fisher folk understand the sea as a larger system and the ebb and flow of their life is part of the happenings of the ecosystem they hail from. This symbolism of the water body is reflected in the rituals and belief system of maritime communities.

The entire productive process of fishing is associated with particular rituals because the fisher folk accord as much importance to the role of supernatural as to the material explanation grounded in the use of technology in explaining their work. As Kurien points out, "Any particular fishing operation in progress is a simultaneous integration of large numbers of discrete thought processes of past experiences coupled with the immediate observations by all the human senses." (204) They work with nature, in harmony, respecting the rhythms and laws, celebrating her seasons and the circulatory of time. Abiding by the laws of the sea, the indigenous do not venture to manipulate and dominate it. Jean Mackey posits that, "Seeking spiritual connection through nature is the foundation of earth-based spirituality sometimes called ecospirituality. Practiced for centuries by indigenous people around the globe earth-based spirituality is gaining popularity." (ix) The rising consciousness among the present generation that one's own well-being is interdependent with the well-being of the earth has provoked today's man to take the life of indigenous seriously. Talking about the interconnectedness of all life forms on earth, Elizabeth Dodson Gray posits that:

With the help of ecology we are beginning to see ourselves living with the interconnected system of natural or biological reality on this planet, in a non-verbal companionship with the sky, the sea, the trees, the birds, the animals, the insects-a companionship in which diversity is valued and never ranked (272).

In the novel the fishermen are portrayed as people who do not save their earnings as they believe that the wide expanse of the sea goddess is their wealth and the deity takes care of every need of the fisherman until he is faithful. There is also a belief that the fisherman cannot save as he makes money at the cost of numerous lives. In Karuthamma's husband Palani's words:

A fisherman cannot save. This is because he makes his money at the cost of millions of lives. He makes his money by cheating and catching innocent beings moving freely in the sea. To look upon those millions dying with

their eyes open was nothing to those who saw that sight every day. But you cannot save money made at the cost of innocent lives. It was not possible (*Chemmeen*, 105).

4. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE FOR A SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The fishermen are pictured fighting the strong currents and waves of the sea. “Despite the fisher folk’s indigenous knowledge of the ecology of the sea, fishing continues to be unpredictable. Unlike land, which is partially domesticated by agriculture, the ocean is still associated with the unknown and the untamed.” (Ram 1992) The struggle to cope with the ruthless nature helps them to realize the true potential of organisms and elements other than human beings. Being devoted to the sea goddess does not always mean that she showers her bounty upon her devotees with ease. The fishermen thrive hard against the waves, whales and sharks and the sea goddess blesses them as their devote wives pray for them at the shore.

The fishermen keep themselves abreast of the mood of the sea. By being conscious of the nature of sea they face every single day, they relate their actions to that of the *Katalamma*’s reactions. By sensing the weather, Chemban Kunju predicts the day’s haul. “Did you see the richness of the sea? Lovely sunshine and weather. Today is an ideal day.” (*Chemmeen*, 56) The fishermen who handle the marine environment with courage and resourcefulness preserve a good accumulation of skill and knowledge of the local conditions. According to Kurien, “It is a cultural continuum of habituated practice stored in the memory and passed on to the next generation in the process of learning-by-doing. It is practical knowledge conditioned into cultural practices. It also represents their “world view” of “mother ocean” as a life-giving system rather than a hunting ground, with the living resources in it being “limitless” and their ability to individually bring ruin to it being rather remote.” (204) The fishermen could predict from the current that followed the monsoon to which seafront the *Chakara* was to come. The heavy rainfall and a large number of rivers make the Kerala coast especially fertile for fish. One specialty of the Kerala coast is the mud banks, known in Malayalam as *Chakara*. It is the formation of clay and organic matters on the coast that occurs after monsoon with the sea remaining calm, thus resulting in good harvest of fish.

The indigenous fisher clan, who expectantly await their sea goddess to bless them with marine resources, strike a stark contrast to the phenomenon of mechanization in fisheries which aims at devouring marine wealth all through the year. The mechanized fishing practice has emerged as a major cause for the enormous ecological consequences due to which fish production has declined drastically. The age old wisdom of the elderly fishermen as portrayed by Thakazhi reminds the present age’s covetous scenario that, since the marine wealth sustains numerous human lives, it should not be over exploited to satisfy the unwarranted gluttonous nature which prevails in most part of the world. During the *Chakara* season when Chemban Kunju wanted yet another haul even after his first successful bounty, Achankunju, a fellow fisherman has a strong opinion, “You can’t empty the sea just because you are making money.” (56) This strongly portrays the staunch indigenous belief of revering the nature and using it only for the sake of one’s survival and never daring to exploit it to satisfy the ever growing requirements of the fast moving world.

5. CONCLUSION:

Although, the major action of the novel revolves around the myth of chastity that conditions the love relationship between the major figures –Karuthamma, a Hindu fisherwoman and Preekkutti, a Muslim fisherman, the customs and the traditions of the fishing clan as portrayed by the author reveals how the indigenous upheld their reverence to the sea goddess through their periodical fishing, not daring to exploit it any more than they needed for their basic survival. Having a spiritual orientation towards their food provider, *Katalamma*, helps the indigenous fisher folk to unite with their fellow human beings and with all other life forms without the greed to exploit them. An ecospiritual justice provides a basis for them to transcend any minor or major differences among them unlike the cultural and political divides that often impedes the modern world’s unified action to reverse ecological degradation and prevent disaster. The indigenous fisher folk’s spiritual orientation to *Katalamma* offers a foundation for a collective action among the fishermen based on their cultural belief systems which is set in accordance with the responsibility to achieve ecological justice and this can be adopted by the modern mechanized fishing arena. The beliefs and practices held dearly by the indigenous can certainly heal the modern man’s long fractured relationship with mother earth. Concluding with Neitschmann’s words:

The vast majority of the world’s biological diversity is not in gene banks, zoos, national parks, or protected areas. Most biological diversity is in landscapes and seascapes inhabited and used by local peoples, mostly indigenous, whose great collective accomplishment is to have conserved the great variety of remaining life forms, using culture, the most powerful and valuable human resource, to do so. (7)

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