



IMPACT FACTOR:3.021

PP:238to245

VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI'S *CHEMMEEN*

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the fishing community of the coastal Kerala as represented by ThakazhiSivasankaraPillai and the beliefs and taboos attached to their indigenous practices. Although a sect of people closely attached to their food provider who is also their ruling deity, the fishermen are drawn towards dominating women and also their female water deity as their need and greed accelerates. Money and power blinds the patriarchal society from adhering to the age old indigenous practices which had helped them enjoy a sustainable living along with nature and with fellow human beings. This domination results in disorientation and psychic imbalance, which proves to be harmful both to nature and fellow beings.

KEYWORDS: goddess worship, nature, domination, taboo, indigenous,

Water plays a central role symbolically and literally in the development of the art and literature of all societies. ThakazhiSivasankaraPillai has used the element of water at a literal level when it acts as the basic food provider of the fishing clan in his novel *Chemmeen* (Shrimp) and uses it symbolically as a powerful destructive force, and also as a cleansing and purifying force. In a world where the place of sacred has been usurped by the ego, the fishermen community portrayed by Thakazhi is one sect of people who value their food provider *Katalamma* (*Katal* meaning sea and *amma* meaning mother in Malayalam) as the most sacred. ThakazhiSivasankaraPillai (1914-1998), the father of modern Malayalam novel has been instrumental in heralding the renaissance in Malayalam literature by choosing ordinary people as the fit subjects for his narratives as he himself was associated with the socialist movement in Kerala. Published in 1956 in Malayalam, *Chemmeen* became the first

novel in Malayalam language to win the SahityaAkademi Award in 1958 and has been translated into more than thirty Indian and foreign languages. Its first English translation by NarayanaMenon, published in 1962 is taken into consideration for this article.

Various goddess have been known and worshipped in many ancient cultures around the world. According to Merlin Stone, “Goddess reverence is traced back to the early Neolithic periods of some ten thousand years ago, some would even say to the Venus statues of the Paleolithic periods of some thirty thousand years ago” (6). Referring to the ancient religions which upheld goddess worship, RianeEisler posits that:

... our most ancient traditions are traditions in which both men and women worshipped a Great Mother, a Great Goddess who was the mother of both divine daughters and divine sons. As we reclaim these ancient traditions, we are also reclaiming the consciousness that women and men can work in equal partnership, that we can honour the feminine in both sexes, that peace is not a Utopian dream. We are increasingly aware that both man and women can be more gentle and compassionate, governed by what sociologist Jessie Bernard calls a “female ethos of love/duty”. And we are reminded that the earth is indeed our Mother, to be respected and revered, rather than polluted and exploited” (27).

But as time passed, there came about a shift from the goddess worship into the worshipping of the male deities. Referring to a parallel shift in the status of women, Carol Bigwood points out that:

In those early non- and pre-Greek societies where deities were female and women were associated with nature, women often possessed significant social status. However, in early Greek societies where male deities increasingly dominated the religious pantheon, the association of women with the earth and the self-closing mystery and inner darkness of the earth affected women’s lives in a profoundly negative way. Women, for most part, were confined by the male-dominated society to insular domestic homes away from the open public world (132).

This gradual domination of female deities by male deities simultaneously led to the domination of women and nature which men started using according to their whims, giving least regard to the consequences which the patriarchal society would have to face. Spirituality by the patriarchal society has often ended up being “earth-disdaining rather than earth-honouring” (Janis Birkland 47) because their connectedness has been narrowly conceived by men in exclusively spiritual terms.

In *Chemmeen*, the protagonist Karuthamma’s mother Chakki, a fisherwoman brought up in the tradition of the seafront, is represented as the inheritor of old truths and of a way of life supposed to be strictly followed by women of the fishing clan. In her words:

When the first fisherman fought with the waves and currents of the sea single-handed on a piece of wood on the other side of the horizon, his wife sat looking westward to the sea and prayed with all her soul for his safety. The waves rose high on the sea.

The whales approached him with their mouths gaping. The sharks charged the boat with their tails. The current dragged the boat into a terrible whirlpool. But he escaped from everything miraculously. Not only that. He came ashore with a very big fish. How was he saved from that storm? Why didn't the whale swallow him? How did the boat survive the attack of a shark? How did the boat sail out of the whirlpool? How did all these things come to pass? Because, on the shore a chaste and pure woman was praying steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea (*Chemmeen* 6).

The women of the fishing clan were "living within the four walls of the fort which nothing could destroy. They were the thick high walls of traditions and taboos of the children of the sea, which have stood for hundreds of years. It was a fort with no doors, no windows." (9) Here the female body becomes an important site of signification for upholding the communities' sense of self-respect. The women who go against the tradition are considered to be the cause of the ruin of the seafront. There are numerous instances in the novel where Chakki reminds her daughter of the strict and unfair standards to which women are held in their community. Here Karuthamma becomes a symbol for the hardships that a woman who belongs to a conservative community endures. Although fisherwomen play an important part in the financial needs of the household, she is not expected to cross the unbreakable walls and marry outside the community which will end up in great verbal and physical abuse. Karuthamma was well aware about the reality surrounding her and thus started avoiding Pareekutti, a Muslim Fish trader, whom she cherished dearly, but she was unable to maintain that distance emotionally. She knew that she would be entangled in that relationship even if she gets married to a Hindu fisherman.

Through Thakazhi's representation of the fishing community, it can be noted that when the fishing boats came ashore in the afternoon, the women went to the sea shore with their basket. Chakki, a dutiful wife who helps her husband in earning and saving money to make his ambition blossom says, "All these days, for the sake of your boat and net, I went selling fish in the east." (18) This shows that the fisherwomen, besides performing their domestic chores, occupied an important position in contributing to the family's income. Vandhana Shiva posits that:

Time allocation studies which do not depend on a prior definition of work, reflect more closely the multiplicity of tasks undertaken, and the seasonal, even daily movement in and out of the conventional labour force which characterize most rural women's livelihood strategy. Gender studies now being published, confirm that women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and hours worked. (166)

After Karuthamma's reluctant marriage with Palani, her dormant strength as a fisherwoman awakens and she too finds her way of helping the household financially selling fish as every other fisherwoman did, "Karuthamma's strength, too, awakened. She, too, had been destined to live by the riches of the sea." (*Chemmeen* 132)

Karuthamma's father ChembanKunju, a fisherman with over-arching aspirations trespasses the traditional practices of his village and also disregards the moral conduct expected of any human being. He has worked on other men's boat for his entire life and he wants nothing more than to buy his own boats and nets. Clever and cunning enough not to be swallowed down by money lenders, ChembanKunju uses Pareekutti's affection towards Karuthamma into lending him a large sum of money. Although Pareekutti is well aware that ChembanKunju would not trespass the customs of his community and accept Pareekutti as his son-in-law, he yields to ChembanKunju's greed, eventually losing his business and his livelihood.

ChembanKunju belonged to the Mukkuvan caste, and according to tradition of the seafront they are ineligible to own a boat. But he bribes his way through the customs and traditions and becomes an owner of the boat. Once the boat was launched, he turns out to be rapacious and evades the meek Pareekutti when he approached him for trading fish. ChembanKunju's pride blinded him from being humane and in Chakki's words, "When he saw the fish, he was transformed into the devil himself." (*Chemmeen* 43).

The law of the sea that a portion of the haul in every boat is the due of the poor people who come to take the cast-off fish, is also violated by ChembanKunju as he refuses to share the *uppa* (small caste-off fish which children usually gather for themselves). His behaviour towards his little daughter Panchami, who had gone near the boat with the rights of a daughter for a few cast-off fish depicts him as the heartless brute who is materialistic in every sense. According to the indigenous customs of the sea front, "The haul he had in his boat had grown in the sea. No one had sown any seeds for it or nurtured it. A portion of it was the due of the poor people who had come to take the caste-off fish. That was the law of the sea." (42)

ChembanKunju was also a person who was a nonconformist regarding the community's belief that one should not go out fishing when the sea goddess had her periods:

Then one day the color of the sea changed. The water looked red. The fishermen believed it was the time the sea-goddess had her periods. For some days after that there would be no fish in the sea. After two or three days of idleness ChembanKunju could not keep quite. He called his men to the boat and discussed the matter. None of them would give him an answer there and then. It was very rarely that the fishermen of that coast had gone to sea at such times. When the goddess of the sea had her periods, they didn't go out fishing." (*Chemmeen* 47)

The owner of a boat was supposed to give the workmen maintenance during such periods of deprivation. But ChembanKunju refused to provide them the money and when starvation started taking control over the fishermen's families, the workmen obliged to ChembanKunju's demand and set forward to break the until non-violated rule of the sea front. But unlike other boat owners who tried their luck, ChembanKunju emerged victorious when his boat came speeding towards the shore with a shark in it. Not once but twice ChembanKunju and his team returned triumphant during the usual period of deprivation.

“Even when the sea seemed barren, ChembanKunju could make money. The old ones were defeated and kept quiet. The women said that they could eat now, thanks to ChembanKunju” (Chemmeen 52)

Amidst all the indigenous beliefs regarding nature worship, as the need and greed of man accelerates, the tenets are often moulded according to ways congenial to man. As Janis Birkeland opines:

Most religions begin as spiritual movements, but they are eventually crystallized and institutionalized to become part of an officially sanctioned power structure (Family or state)... Spirituality, belief systems, or world views do not necessarily improve individual behaviour. This is because behaviour is not solely a product of either rationality or beliefs. Behaviour patterns are so deeply encoded that we often do not perceive them. Ways of acting and relating are ingrained from earliest childhood, a product of habit, role-modeling, social reinforcement, and institutions. This is one reason why there is often a gap between what people believe in and what they will do to get their own way, along the whole spectrum from personal to international relations (47).

Here, although ChembanKunju is represented as a fisherman ingrained in the customs and traditions of the seafront, he is prepared to compromise them in order to satisfy his dream of owning a boat. He even trespasses the age old customs and traditions of the seafront which was being strictly adhered to, for ages. When the fishermen earn money during their usual period of starvation, it triggers them to overlook their conventional norm of refraining from fishing during certain spell which would have enhanced the regeneration of the marine life.

ChembanKunju's dishonesty drives Pareekutti to bankruptcy. He is reduced to impoverished solitude wandering the beach pinning for the love of a woman he cannot even dream of marrying. By focusing on money, power and his own success in acquiring more number of boats, ChembanKunju also puts off his responsibility to marry away Karuthamma, who according to the fishing community is of marriageable age and would bring ruin to the sea front if left unmarried. When people of the Nirkunnam sea front berate ChembanKunju and Chakki for violating their custom by having their nineteen-year-old daughter remain at home without being sent off in marriage, ChembanKunju eventually solves the problem by finding an orphan fisherman named Palani from the neighboringThrikunnapuzha seafront, whomChembanKunju's neighbor's consider unfit for a gracious girl as Karuthamma. ChembanKunju's overarching dominance can be linked to the dominant patriarchal cultures as explained by Janis Birkeland:

In the dominant patriarchal cultures, reality is divided according to gender, and a higher value is placed on those attributes associated with masculinity, a construction that is called “hierarchical dualism.” In these cultures women have historically been seen as closer to the earth or nature (perhaps due to childbirth and menstruation). Also, women and nature have been juxtaposed against mind and spirit, which have been associated in Western cosmology with the “masculine” and elevated to a higher plane of being.

Although we can only speculate about how patriarchal consciousness evolved, it is clear that a complex morality based on dominance and exploitation has developed in conjunction with the devaluing of nature and “feminine” values (18-19).

The male chauvinist ChembanKunju enhances his progress economically and upgrades his life style whereas gives least regard to his attitude of over exploiting the sea goddess and trespasses the community’s staunch belief systems. Immediately after the death of his wife Chakki, ChembanKunju marries Pappikunju, the widow of Kandankoran of Pallikunnath, the man from whom he buys his first boat. It can be seen as a mere act to satisfy his dream of enjoying a life like Kandankoran who had money and a physically attractive wife. But Pappikunju ends up being a bane for him. Unlike Chakki, who had been a pillar of support for ChembanKunju in all his endeavours, Pappikunju’s actions were a stark contrast to his ambitions and way of life. She was disowned by ChembanKunju and thus ended up being a “helpless woman wandering homeless on the sea shore”(Chemmeen150). ChembanKunju, the transgressor of traditional beliefs and customs is entwined in chaos and disharmony and this situation is attributed to his breaking of the laws of the sea. In a discussion among the fishermen regarding the woe of the person of the wrong caste getting a boat and net, the elderly Raman *muppan* says that in such cases the boat and net does not last long. It turns out to be a correct prediction because ChembanKunju ends up being a failure in the highly prosperous endeavour he started and roams about the seashore losing his mental balance. “From the side of that (the) boat the terrible laughter of ChembanKunju emanated. It was like the laughter of death”. (Chemmeen 159) Chaia Heller’s words prove right in ChembanKunju’s case:

Emma Godson shows how domination deprives people not only of material needs but sensual and social ones. Authority kills our capacity for self-expression and joy within the context of a co-operative community. People are curious, social creatures with the need to taste, see and dance in the world. We have a desire to know and to be known, and to explore the perimeters of our imaginations and abilities. However, in exchange for true, erotic love, we have been fed nutritionless food, with romance thrown in as a sweetener. In exchange for feeling connected to others, to our work, and to nature, we are encouraged to connect to lifeless symbols of joy and power in the form of money and possessions. (240)

The human potential for sociability and cooperation both within society and with nature needs to be uncovered by our ability to be humans-in-nature and humans-as-nature. ChembanKunju’s relationship with the natural world is predicated on a repression of a desire to destroy nature rather than on a desire to enhance nature. He expresses a repression of a destructive desire, rather than a release of a human desire to participate creatively in the natural world. Loving the sea to meet selfish end keeps him from identifying and demanding the distinctively human potential to love nature through creativity and cooperation within society. Represented as a counterpart to the modern, nature devouring, solipsistic man, ChembanKunju negates the indigenous feelings and women’s emotions as the absence of real thought and knowledge. Although ruled by a female deity, the fishing community maintains a

male-dominated system of social relations and values. Through the taboos imposed upon the women, a systematic devaluation of the feminine principle, along with the support of the elderly women materializes. The masculine constructs and values have been internalized in their mind and embodied in their institution. ChembanKunju's act of disregarding both the feelings of women around him, and the effort to master over sea goddess can be equated to the awareness brought forth by ecofeminism that offers a realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to man's attitude towards women. According to Janis Birkeland, "To ecofeminists, values and actions are inseparable: one cannot care without acting. Ecofeminist theory and analysis has only been developing since the 1970s, but the practice has been growing in many parts of the world." (19)

It is a universal truth that men of all classes use and take for granted power over women within their class, even when power is denied to those men in public arena. In *Chemmeen*, not only the greedy ChembanKunju is portrayed as dominating and abusing the women around him, but the less fortunate Achankunju who mostly squandered his money is also found manhandling his wife when the family had to starve. To Janis Birkeland, "Ecofeminists believe that we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa." (22)

Here MartiKheel's argument regarding the cult of co-existence is worth mentioning:

Ecofeminists and other nature writers have often proclaimed the importance of a "holistic world view." By "holism" they refer to the notion of the "interdependence of all of life." But interdependence is hardly an ideal in and of itself. A master and slave may be said to be interconnected, but clearly that is not the kind of relation that ecofeminists wish to promote. The *quality* of relation is more important than the fact that a relation of some kind exists. If our society is to regain a sense of psychic health, we must learn to attend to the *quality* of relations and interactions, not just the *existence* of relations in themselves. Thus, when hunters claim to promote the well-being of the "whole" by killing individual animals, or to "love" the animals that they kill, we must challenge their story. Our own notion of holistic ethics must contain a respect for the "whole" *as well as* individual beings (261).

In ChembanKunju's case, the quality of his relationship with both nature and women are deteriorated and this can be attributed as a microcosm of the universal domination of men over women and nature. Thus the value of nature and femininity are devalued to a great extent, and this has been a major cause for the depletion of world's natural resources. The marginalization continues and the male-centered domination has been viewed by many female theorists as a theoretically disastrous move because of perpetuating hierarchical binary and gender relations. Unless the world overcomes the polarization of power, the preservation of nature can hardly be executed and the planet earth's doomsday will not be far away.

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