

Myth of Chastity as a Patricentric Clutch on Women: A Study on Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*

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Abstract— *Myths, folklores and legends root in depth through the tropical Malabar Coast of Kerala. Both nature and mystical elements always find its place in the stories that Kerala has to offer us. Even in the birth of the land, Kerala is rooted in many mythological stories among which the myth associated with Parasurama is considered as the most authentic one. As per the myths Parasurama created Kerala by throwing his axe from Gokarn, in Karnataka. This one myth is enough to portray how this land is deeply inflicted by myths and continues to lives in a mythological world. The land and people of Kerala is still governed by age old customs, traditions and rituals. Unfortunately the society still continues to be patriarchal and so the myths are often leading to the oppression and subjugation of women. The lives of women are governed and ruled by the frames and norms of morality that are being created by the patriarchal society. Chastity is one such norm created by the androcentric society and it always remains the yardstick or a tool to measure the femininity of women. The paper studies how the sanctity of women is evaluated exercising the myth of chastity in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Chemmeen.*

Keywords—*Chastity, Communal Practices, Feminism, Fishermen Community, Freedom, Myth, Patriarchy, Social Mirror, Weapon.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the epic stories like Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Puranas, great importance has been given to the chastity of women. The mythical women like sati and savithri are hailed as the epitome of ideal women and these mythical characters uphold their chastity and are always at the service for their husbands by adorning them. The ideal wife is the perpetual giver and the husband always remains the perpetual taker of service and love. One such mythical female character associated with coastal community of Kerala is the Kadalamma. The myth develops as such that the first fisherman, Aadi Mukkuva who went out in to the sea for fishing got stuck up in a wrathful storm but was saved by the Kadalamma only

because his chaste wife waited, prayed and did penance for him in the shores the whole night. The sea is being mythologized as Kadalamma, the preserver and the destroyer, benevolent mother and wrathful goddess simultaneously. As per myth she becomes a terrific goddess when the woman folk at home don't keep up her vow of chastity and the Kadalamma revenges by taking her man away from her. The chastity of the female counterpart is not only necessary for the life of fishermen but also for the well-being of the community as a whole. The myth advocates the men to be brave and daring as he could and the women to be ideal and chaste and if not it triggers Kadalamma's fury. Chastity of women alone somehow started getting synonymous with purity. If the womenfolk are pure and chaste the Kadalamma rescues their men even in fieriest condition of sea otherwise she dooms the unfaithful wife with widowhood. Hence this myth becomes a norm that governs the women and coastal life in Kerala. The novel *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai also revolves around this myth of chastity. The novel published in 1956 was the Malayalam novel to win the Sahitya Academy award in 1958. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai was concerned about the lives of the lower caste people and he always questioned the hierarchy system that existed in Kerala as in his novel 'Thottiyude Makan' translated as 'Scavengers Son.' In the novel *Chemmeen*, he exposes the myth of Chastity which always oppressed the womenfolk of the coastal community. His childhood memories with the sea and coastal area had induced him to write such a novel and to our surprise he had taken only eight days to complete the evergreen classic novel ever in Malayalam. He had retold about his inspiration to write such a novel in his prefatory note in 1995 titled 'The Story of My *Chemmeen*'.

My intimacy with the seaside began when i was nine years old. I knew all the faces and the moods of the sea goddess. My mind was flooded with the thoughts of the sea goddess and chakara. One morning, I stuffed a few shirts and mundus into a bag and walked to Ambalapuzha, I was on my way to Kottayam.

The novel originally written in Malayalam was translated into more than thirty regional languages. The first translation into English was made by Narayana Menon and the translation that he gave for the title was 'Anger of the Sea Goddess.' The importance of the sea and the myth revolving around it in the novel might have forced him to give such a title for the novel. But when Anita Nair translated it she didn't even do a literal translation from Malayalam to English and she retained the title *Chemmeen*. The novel was adopted into film in 1965, directed by Ramu Kariyat and the visualization made an enhanced depiction of the myth with visual scenery and songs. The song 'Pennale pennale' itself was the retelling of the myth Aadi Mukkuva and its literal translation is as follows;

To sea went a fisherman once seeking pearls
Sadly got caught up in the western winds
To his wife's persistent penance on the shore
Answered Kadalamma with his safe return.

II. MYTH AND DEFIANCE

Karuthamma the central character of the story falls in love with Pareekutti, son of a Muslim rich merchant. When Karuthamma's mother Chakki comes to know about her relationship with Pareekutti she tries to warn her by unfolding the myth of chastity. Chakki reprimands and warns her:

In this vast sea, there is much to fear, my daughter, my magale. All of which determines whether a man who goes out to sea will return. And the only thing we can do as women is keep with true minds and bodies. Otherwise, they and their boats will be swallowed up by the undertow. The life of a man who goes out to sea rests in the hands of his women in the shore. (8)

Chastity has become a word that is being associated with women in the male dominated society. No myth questions the chastity of men and all myths are concerned only on the chastity of women. Even though both male and female engages in sexual relationship only women's chastity is the concern of the society. Chastity has become a word that is only associated with women. Chakki is also too adamant on this myth of chastity on women's purity that has been inherited to her by her ancestors as she says:

Virtue is the most important thing, my daughter. Purity of body and mind. A fisherman's wealth is his fisherwoman's virtue. (8)

The woman who negates her vow of chastity is often ostracized in the society. Even Chakki had been accused for her infidelity when she tried to defend her daughter from the accusation of suspicious neighboring folks. This shows that even the women themselves have internalized these myths and have become scapegoats

with their own will. Karuthamma too is convinced of this myth when her friend Nallapennu retells to her stories of devastation caused on the shore by unfaithful women. The stories of the fallen women withheld her from fulfilling her romantic involvement with Pareekutti. The novel revolves around this myth and the myth comes into play throughout the novel, but none questions its authenticity. The myth is taken for granted by both men and women.

Karuthamma also gradually internalizes this myth and she gives her consent to marry Palani. Palani is an orphan and he doesn't have any familial relations and hence Chembankunju was planning to make Palani stay at their own home but he refused. Not only Palani, but Karuthamma also refuses to stay home back because she believes that if she continues to be in her homeland she may lose her virginity and chastity, a characteristic fundamental for the marakathees. Chakki falls ill during the marriage of Karuthamma but she forces the new bride to go with her husband because she understood the mental stress of Karuthamma if she stays back at home. Karuthamma leaves with Palani in spite of the accusations because she feared about the disaster she may bring to her coast. She wishes to be faithful to her community and to her newly married husband. The over emphasis and belief over the myth by the community made her to reject the love of Pareekutti.

Marriage was not an end to all these as Karuthamma had expected. In the new coast she was not welcomed whole heartedly and people over there were spreading ill news on her illicit relationship with Pareekutti. Palani also had to face bitter experience because he had to marry Karuthamma and at times even Palani insulted or questioned her about all the rumors. The community began to alienate Palani and he was forbidden to go to sea with other fishermen folks, but through his firm determination he was able to manage a small plank and he started fishing alone. Once when Palani was out for fishing the Pareekutti and Karuthamma gets a chance for rekindling their inner fire and hence Karuthamma breaks her vow of chastity. Meanwhile Palani is dragged into the depth of stormy sea and he couldn't get guidance of Arundhathi which is mythologized as the symbol of chastity. Palani is carried away by the sea and it seems as the punishment by the Kadalamma. At the end of the novel we see that explicitly without using any metaphor it is stated that the sea goddess is the fisherwoman at home. Palani's last call for Karuthamma resembles the heartfelt cry Caesar made to Brutus 'you too Brutus'.

The novel ends when both Karuthamma and Pareekutti lie dead beside the shore along with the shark Palani was struggling during his death. Palani had been taken away by Kadalamma as revenge towards

Karuthamma who broke the law of chastity and he was screaming;

Karuthamma ...Palani's call triumphed over the whirlwinds roar. The call arose above all that. Why was he calling for Karuthamma? Wasn't there a reason for that? The goddess who protects the fisherman at sea is his fisherwomen at home. And so it was to her he was appealing for prayers as that first fisherwomen had prayed for the safe return of her husband. Didn't that first fisherman despite being caught in a whirlwind storm? Only because of his wife's penance. Palani too believed he would return. He had a fisherwoman. And she would pray for him. Hadn't she promised him this that very day? The fury of the storm grew. But Palani vanquished that as well. The storm aligned itself with the waves. Yet another wave came towering in, by the time his lips formed 'Karu...' the wave was on him. (236)

In the novel it is only Pareekutti who doesn't say a word about this myth and it may be because he doesn't belong to the Mukkuva community as he was born a Muslim. This shows that this myth only existed within this coastal people and was not a part of larger community. We cannot conclude his silence on this issue as the peak of his love for Karuthamma but rather the fact that he belonged to another community and hence he didn't care about this myth. This implies that its ones ancestral history, occupation and social hierarchy that pave way for such myths.

Myths in India are always good at relating women to nature and this is evident in the novel *Chemmeen* to a large extent. The sea in the novel is seen as a goddess and referred as Kadalamma attributing it a female name and bestowing female characteristics on it. The sea is left free without any trade after heavy monsoon rains so that the natural system is being restored by reproduction. But the rural coastal fisher folk doesn't possess these rational thinking and their explanation to this interval period may seem so irrational to the scientific community. Their explanation for this is that the sea goddess is on menstruation and it will induce rage from her part if she is disturbed, hence it is better to stay away from her. The symbolism of sea as a female goddess has also another politics behind it. In our society whatever good or bad happens, the women is blamed for the occurrence. For example if a newly married bride enters a family and something good happens it is said that it is because of her goodness. At the same time if something bad happens she is being blamed for her misfortune and the society ostracizes her. This same thing happens with sea in the novel if something fine occurs she is being hailed and praised as the goddess of wealth and

perseverance and she is blamed if something ill happens. The females in the society are also viewed in the same light either they idealize women or they see them as misery. They are not seen as human beings with soul and body as men. The embodiment of Kadalamma as a woman can also offer us a misinterpretation that women are always at their extremes in her nature, either she loves or she rages to her paramount.

III. CONCLUSION

Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai, during his childhood had close acquaintance with the coastal community and its myth of chastity and his novel was an embodiment of this myth. He only depicted the myth to the readers and he didn't either promote or criticize the myth, it was left to the readers to interpret the writing with their rational thinking. Now it have been more than 60 years after the novel was published and the mode of acceptance have also changed a lot. Myth versus reality is a topic for heated debates in the 21st century because of the increase in scientific temperament of human beings. Palani's death cannot be seen as a death caused by the revenge of Kadalamma rather his death was caused by the climatic condition of the sea. The rage of the sea is a natural phenomenon and only irrational people could conclude it as the fury of Kadalamma. The death of Palani is inevitable because he sets for fishing alone in the adverse condition that too in a boat of plank. His death cannot be connected with the chastity and purity of Karuthamma. The story might have been introduced as a politics by the manipulative patriarchal society who needs their womenfolk to be devoid of adultery. So we can easily conclude this myth as the tool of oppression used by the patriarchal society to subjugate women to the least. The people who think rationally could only consider this as a lame reasoning with no logic based on myths which do not have any scientific evidence. Whatever that happens in the nature is a natural phenomenon, but the superstitious people turn it supernatural. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge has called drama the 'willing suspension of disbelief', the myth in the novel can also be considered as the 'willing suspension of disbelief.' The characters might know that it is illogical and it's only a tale passed orally or so and inherited to the next generations. But the readers couldn't go in pace with character's thought process and for them it's beyond their willingness to accept such a myth. It was their indisposition that gave multi-dimensional reading to the novel beyond its own boundaries created by the author.

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