



PLETHORA OF TRAUMAS IN THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI'S CHEMMEEN

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Social influence is ubiquitous in mankind which refers the way how individuals adjust their behavior to meet the command of the community. It comprises the ways in which people adapt their habits to meet the demands of the milieu. Indian society expects the individuals to act according to the norms and conditions that they establish in order to keep the harmony and for smooth functioning. Sometimes this societal involvement may affect the personal life and privacy of every individual, because what seems right to one could be wrong for the other.

Society and culture are inter-related. Society itself is the group of people who shares a common culture or civilization. It may be ethnic or racial, based on gender, or due to the shared beliefs. “None of us remains invulnerable to the demands of our physical survival or stands aloof and insusceptible to the shaping influences of society. We live in a social world and the prevailing cultural norms affect each of us.” (Oldster, *Dead Toad Scrolls*). Casual or unconstrained conversation about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true is always one of the greatest drawbacks of the society.

The negative aspects of society and its expectation was intelligibly portrayed in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's (1912-1999) seminal novel *Chemmeen* (1956). His writings are known for the vivid portrayal of the lives and struggles of the people of Kerala. Pillai was a master storyteller, whose works captured the essence of Kerala's culture, society, and history.

The novel *Chemmeen* revolves around a traditional belief related to female virtue that was prevalent in the Mukkuva huts of the coastal areas of Kerala. This credence leads to the traumas encountered by the characters in this novel, that had completely changed their lives and had killed all their hopes and expectations.

Karuthamma, the protagonist of forbidden love, was a loser in every perspective of her life due to the influences of society and people, which prevents her from pursuing all her dreams that seems to be wrong to the people around her. She falls in love with Pareekutty, the son of a muslim fish wholesaler. Her love for him was ethical and virtuous but being an illiterate woman of mid twentieth century, she lacks the courage to reveal her feelings towards him. Their private meetings in the shore behind the boat enrich their bond with love and affection. She sometimes notices that his wandering gaze is rooted in her bosom, that often makes her feeling naked, which initially irritates her but gradually she realizes that it was not the lust he had but the feeling that he exclusively possesses towards her with extreme love.

The love she enriches within herself is interrupted by her mother Chakki who strictly follows the terms and conditions of their community, who suspects Karuthamma's relationship with Pareekutty but



unsure about it unless her daughter's revelation. Therefore, 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. (*Chemmeen*, 8)

Chastity is a word which is being associated with only women in the male dominated society. It is concerned only to the purity of women even though both male and female engages in sexual relationship. Chakki is too adamant on this myth of 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.

The words of Chakki make Karuthamma into a dilemma, that she cannot ignore her mother's advice and at the same time it is very difficult for her to live a life without Pareekutty. A fear evokes inside her of losing him. She is also haunted by the guilt of the betrayal that her father did to him. Karuthamma's father Chembankunju borrowed a large sum of money from Pareekutty to buy a boat and a net, on a condition that the fish hauled by the boat will be sold to him. Unfortunately, that dishonest fisherman sells the fish to someone else and did not give the money back. This drives Pareekutty into bankruptcy.

The whole community is against Chembankunju for spending a large sum of money for buying a boat and a net instead of finding a suitable husband for his daughter. The rumors regarding Karuthamma's affair with Pareekutty started spreading in the village and Ayankunju, a villager says, "While the girl is determined to ruin our shores, Chembankunju has gone off to buy a boat and nets." (*Chemmeen*, 36)

Ayankunju represents the people who are badmouthing about the lives of other people and his words are not merely a gossip but the opinion of the villagers. People continue their gossiping and it has crossed the limits. Karuthamma's mind started wandering. She loves Pareekutty and there would be no place for another man in her heart. She wished to forget him and their relationship for a moment. She is born as a fisherwoman, so the society wants her to die as a fisherman's wife. She believes that, she will be able to forget Pareekutty, if her father returns the money that he borrowed from him. So that she could not bear to see him desolate and ruined because of her father. In fact, it was this image of him haunted her.

It was during a fishing expedition, Chembankunju meets Palani, an orphan fisherman. His determination and courage impressed that old man and he wished Palani to accompany him for the rest of his journey. He thought to get him married to Karuthamma and Chakki also feels happy for it. Therefore, Chembankunju invited Palani to his house for having a feast together, and he asked Palani's consent for the marriage and he agreed for it even without seeing Karuthamma. It is because he does not belong to any family, he had no memory of either his father or mother. No one brought him up, he is just working for himself, no one is concerning about him and it is for the first time somebody is inviting him for having food and they treated him like a son. Chakki says:



Son, you are alone. And you are a hard worker. But all this will change. You won't be so fit one day. And a man has to have some possessions in his life. You need someone to take care of you. You need that too. Son, think about it, someone to cook for you, and if you have the place, a home- won't that be something? (*Chemmeen*,85,86).

The words of Chakki impressed Palani; thus, he agrees for the marriage and they fix the marriage without Karuthamma's consent. It is Chakki who tried to convince her to marry Palani by praising him with radiant words: So, my daughter, you are agreeable to this marriage, aren't you? He is a good boy, my daughter, a very good boy! (*Chemmeen*,91) Karuthamma, being an honest woman was not ready to marry another man unless they pay the amount back to Pareekutty. Unless you pay that money back, I won't agree. Or, I will kill myself... that's for sure! (*Chemmeen*, 92).

She agrees to marry Palani on Chakki's words that she will pay Pareekutty's amount. Thus, the marriage is fixed. Karuthamma did not know how to explain what was in her heart. She becomes the focus of attention amidst the women of the neighbourhood. Once the marriage is fixed, it is the responsibility of the neighbourhood woman to instruct the bride on the religion of wifehood. Nallapennu, a neighbouring woman told Karuthamma:

Daughter, we are entrusting a man to you. It isn't as simple as what you think. We are not giving a girl to a man. On the contrary it is the other way round. Our men live in a sea where the waves rise and fall, daughter! Daughter, women have hearts that are easily turned. So, you have to be careful. (*Chemmeen*,103).

These words imply the responsibilities of a wife and the fact that the lives of the fishermen depend on the chastity of the fisherwoman. Karuthamma is listening to each word carefully and she is overwhelmed. She is ready to say goodbye to the place where she was born and grew up. It is the fate of every girl that they must overcome this departure and have to adjust to the new environment. She says goodbye to all the familiar and unfamiliar and that night she heard a song and it is being sung by Pareekutty. Her heart is longing to see him, she wishes to ran to him, but she consoles herself by saying that the man, Pareekutty does not exist anymore in her life. But it is impossible for her to prevent herself from seeing him. She stepped out and ran to the shore and there she meets her little bossman. The words of Pareekutty touches her heart and she seems to be speechless: Once Karuthamma leaves... will Karuthamma ever think of me? Even if you don't think of me, I will sit in this shore and sing. Even when I am an old man with no teeth, I will continue to sing. (*Chemmeen*,107). Every word of him is like stabbing a corpse, and she seems to be completely powerless. Karuthamma leaves the place in silence, and he continues to watch her and they are parted.

On the wedding day certain bad omens take place. A quarrel between Palani's friends and Chembankunju's friends, then Chakki falls ill. After the marriage Karuthamma went with Palani, despite her mother's illness and her father's repeated request to stay. She leaves the shore and went to Palani's village with a strong desire to be a faithful and lovable wife to her husband.

Palani, being an orphan, began enjoying the feeling of loving someone and being loved by someone after his marriage with Karuthamma. He is very proud to have such a beautiful wife. Their happy life and romantic moments were interrupted by the rumors that spreads from Karuthamma's village to



Palani's village. People began making fun of the couple and the men who often feels jealous for Palani to have a beautiful wife, took this as the best opportunity to incapacitate him.

The villagers started saying that Karuthamma does not deserve to accommodate there in the shore and intoxicate her husband in all possible ways. They are insulting Palani both privately and publicly. He is furious to hear all these rumors about the woman whom he is loving the most, and Karuthamma is heartbroken when she came to know about this. She had already taken a firm decision that she will not cause her husband to be lost at sea. But she constantly used to ask Palani whether he trust her or not. Palani replied her that: Why do you keep on asking me, If I believe in you, if I believe in you ... as if you don't trust yourself. (*Chemmeen*,145).

She is puzzled whether she should tell her husband that once she had loved a man. But she did not have much courage to reveal it to him. Palani's friends restrict him from going along with them to the sea. They are afraid because everyone suspects the chastity of Karuthamma, so that if something happens to Palani when he was in the sea, it will affect the people along with him. Therefore, the entire villagers started cornering the couple. Karuthamma's and Palani's life entered a realm of flatness. The ardour of those first day was gone. It is natural for things to settle bit. When she became a topic of discussion, Palani too becomes one. When he walked by, people whispered about him behind his back.

Palani sometimes shows his frustration towards her but never distrusts her. When Karuthamma becomes pregnant, the couple becomes very happy but the villagers continue to haunt them. They mocked Palani by saying that Pareekutty was responsible for her pregnancy and it seems to be the greatest insult for a husband and the most heartbreaking words for a faithful wife.

Meanwhile Pareekutty does not overcome his feelings for Karuthamma, but he knows that she is the wife of another man. But he is always controlling his emotions. He is also haunted by the rumors about their love and people continuously mocked him for his love failure. There lies the irony that the society prevents them from getting married and the same society is stabbing them for their unsuccessful love.

Karuthamma's fate turns upside down with the arrival of her younger sister Panchami to her hovel. She came to her sister because her mother died and Chembankunju married a widow of a fisherman. She left the house because she does not want to live with her step mother. Unfortunately, the second wife also leaves Chembankunju and he became mad. Karuthamma mourns for the plight of her father and Panchami brought up the topic of Pareekutty. She narrated the young man's Pathetic tale: He has nothing, echechi. He's a pauper. And he keeps wandering on the shore. You'd think he's a mad man if you see him. It is really very sad! (*Chemmeen*,225).

Karuthamma is eager to know about Pareekutty. A valuable life had been wrecked, or it is destroyed. She possessed courage to enquire about him, that she did not shows earlier because life and circumstances had brought her to it. Until then she had been a timid woman, afraid of everything and everyone, without a will or desires of her own. Perhaps she may have had dreams of her own, but none of it had been spoken out. Karuthamma's voice quivered: Does he then ever ask you about echechi? (*Chemmeen*,226).

Unfortunately, Palani stood before them and, Panchami and Karuthamma leapt to their feet. Thus, her secret is revealed. Palani started questioning her and she replied him that she was in love with him. He



did not utter a word and he went to the sea. Palani's boat fled through that eternal sea into the south. A lot of water filled the boat. His child on the shore started crying as its innocence could perceive its father rowing away as if possessed by a madness. The child could be crying seeing its father go away to the endless western horizon. But Karuthamma cannot hear that because she is not chaste enough to hear that. When her husband is struggling at the sea, she is waiting with a hope for the arrival of Pareekutty. She went out of the hovel and see a man in the moonlight and it is for him she is longing for. She is not frightened and he stepped towards her. She is not caring whether he is staring at her breasts or buttocks, and she had no such fears. They stood looking each other and both forget all the disappointments of their lives. She moves into his arms and laid herself against his chest.

Meanwhile Palani catches the biggest fish on the shore. But the fish moves in a circular sweep and the boat follows it. For a moment he thought that he is moving to the palace of the mother sea, all the waters of the sea gathered in one place, the whirlpool and the boat capsized and Palani cling to it. For his last moment, he exhaled and screamed, 'Karuthamma'!

Why Palani is calling Karuthamma at his last moment? According to their belief, the goddess who protects the fisherman at sea is his wife at home. Palani too believed that he would return because his wife would pray for him. The wind, the thunder, and the lightening all together vented themselves. Two days later, the dead bodies of a man and a woman locked in an embrace came to rest on the sands, Karuthamma and Pareekutty.

The love of Karuthamma and Pareekutty remains unfulfilled due to their cultural differences, societal influences, and caste hierarchy. It is like the relationship between Velutha and Ammu in Arundhati Roy's novel *God of Small Things*, where their social environment prevents their union because Velutha belongs to lower caste and Ammu's familial circumstance is superior to him. The entire plot of the novel revolves around the relationship of these two characters and the impact of their social background in their affair. The life of Velutha and Ammu was tragic and it is like the tragic end of Karuthamma and Pareekutty, by encountering the unjust traumas in their lifetime. They undergo plethora of traumas throughout the novel, were they lack their fundamental rights. Society expects people to behave according to its terms and conditions and one who act against it will be considered as a rebel like Velutha or coward as Pareekutty. However, Karuthamma's conflict relates to Ammu and Velutha. One should have the right to choose their partner according to their wish. In both these novels the central characters were denied this right and society becomes the villain of their desires, that in no way brings any goodness in their future life rather leads to a tragic end even by spoiling the lives of other characters.

The major action of the novel revolves around the myth of chastity, but all these customs and beliefs were enacted and imposed by the people in order to strengthen their tradition. But in this novel, it is revealed that if people follow the tradition and culture, they face more conflicts. The characters lost their identity. The novel is an answer to certain questions like, what brings him back to the shore? What causes him to lose his way? All these questions are answered without losing the social relevance of following these myths and beliefs.

Patriarchal system and self -Centered attributes are the inevitable forces which put forward by the Indian society, that subjugates the inner voices, hopes and dreams of many women. Indian concepts demand that, 'father to be her protector in childhood, brother to be her protector in teenage, husband to



be her protector in youth and middle age, and son to be her protector in old age'. This concept of dependency of women on men is revealed in this novel that portrays women as the submissive group in the society. "her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, and compassion". (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*). The words of Beauvoir suggests that the van of a woman is cut by someone and the same people blame her for the inability to fly.

Society and family stop Karuthamma from pursuing her ultimate dream of having a life with Pareekutty and the same group punishes her for the broken love and haunts her till the end of her life. Karuthamma, a vulnerable woman of the twentieth century, sacrifices her love for the community she belongs, and finally she is portrayed as a selfish woman who forgets her husband who trust her even when the whole world blames her for the past life she had. As Beauvoir said, the life of a man has value, if he values the feelings of others. Karuthamma fails to understand the feelings of Palani and her act of committing suicide with Pareekutty is like admitting the words of the villagers as true.

People often blame Karuthamma for spoiling the lives of two men, but her life, dreams and hopes are shattered by the culture, tradition, and societal norms. Her social environment is the major reason for her transformation from a faithful wife to the one who cause the death of her husband by losing her purity.

It is interesting to see how *Chemmeen* advocates traditionalism. Not just Karuthamma and Pareekutty, every character who defies tradition ends up paying a huge price. The sea is the major character in the story, and it has been beautifully described. Thakazhi's story is visually rich with details. Literally people can feel and smell the environment of sea shore in the novel. All characters of the novel trust in destiny and they struggle against the odds. Tradition and taboos are very powerful for them. The novel is a complete understanding of the disintegration of tradition, social and religious beliefs in fisher folk. "How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved" (Freud, *Letters*). These words are very much relevant in this present scenario of love and relationship. One gets enough courage when he is in love. An individual will strive hard to fulfill his love and it is the most ecstatic feeling that one should experience when he is in love. But in the novel *Chemmeen*, both Karuthamma and Pareekutty do not show the courage to overcome the impediments like caste hierarchy and social background. They allow the society to take decisions on their life and act according to their commands and orders, thus leads to a huge disaster. They are the victims of the society and Palani; an innocent man becomes the real sufferer of their love.

Unfortunately, all the three poor souls became the victims of the stereotyped society. One must value the social norms but it is more important that one has to value his/her own feelings.

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