

Intertwined Destinies: Women And The Environment In T S Pillai's Chemmeen

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ABSTRACT

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's 'Chemmeen' offers a glimpse into the lives of Kerala's coastal fishing communities. This paper explores the intricate relationship between these people and their environment, emphasizing their indigenous fishing practices steeped in beliefs and taboos. The community's deep connection with the sea, both as a vital source of sustenance and a revered deity, is examined against the backdrop of a growing patriarchal dominance. As societal needs and material desires escalate, men not only exploit women but also the female water deity traditionally worshipped. This shift towards domination disrupts the delicate balance with nature and fellow beings, leading to unforeseen consequences for both the environment and the community. Ultimately, the paper argues that adhering to sustainable indigenous practices fostered a harmonious coexistence with nature and a more balanced society.

KEYWORDS: goddess worship, nature, domination, taboo, indigenous, exploitation, social disorientation.

Water holds profound symbolic and practical significance in the development of art and literature across societies. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai vividly incorporates the element of water in his novel "Chemmeen" (Shrimp), employing it both literally as a fundamental sustenance provider for the fishing community and symbolically as a potent force of destruction, purification, and renewal. In Thakazhi's narrative, water serves not only as the lifeblood of the fishing clan but also as a revered entity, symbolized by Katalamma (derived from "Katal," meaning sea, and "amma," meaning mother in Malayalam). In a world where sacredness often gives way to ego, the fishermen portrayed by Thakazhi stand out for their profound reverence towards Katalamma as their primary sustainer and protector. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1914 - 1998), hailed as the father of modern Malayalam novels, played a pivotal role in the literary renaissance of Kerala by championing narratives centered around ordinary people. Influenced by his involvement in the socialist movement, his choice of protagonists reflects a commitment to portraying the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities.

"Chemmeen," first published in Malayalam in 1956, made history by becoming the first Malayalam novel to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958. Translated into over thirty Indian and foreign languages, its initial English translation by Narayana Menon in 1962 remains a cornerstone for discussions and analyses of the novel's themes and socio-cultural impact.

According to Merlin Stone, the reverence for various goddesses traces back to the early Neolithic periods approximately ten thousand years ago, with some scholars extending this reverence even further to the Paleolithic Venus figurines dating back some thirty thousand years (Stone 6). Riane Eisler builds on this perspective, asserting that ancient religions often centered around goddess worship. She posits that these early cultures, through their veneration of goddesses, emphasized values of nurturing, cooperation, and interconnectedness with nature, contrasting with later patriarchal systems that prioritized dominance and hierarchy (Eisler 6). This historical trajectory underscores the profound role of goddesses in shaping early religious and cultural practices worldwide.

Many ancient traditions revered a Great Mother goddess as the source of creation and nurturing, with both men and women participating in her worship. As we reclaim these ancient traditions, we are also reclaiming the consciousness that women and men can work in equal partnership, that we can honor the feminine in both sexes, that peace is not a Utopian dream. There's a growing recognition that both genders can embody qualities traditionally associated with femininity, such as gentleness and compassion. Sociologist Jessie

Bernard terms this inclination 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. Carol Bigwood observes a parallel shift in the status of women..Over time, many cultures switched from worshipping goddesses to male gods. Archaeologist Carol Bigwood suggests this wasn't just a religious change, but also reflected a shift in how women were viewed. As societies became more patriarchal, Bigwood argues, the importance of the feminine declined, with religious stories now dominated by male figures (Bigwood, This wasn't just a minor adjustment; it marked a major cultural and social transformation, impacting how people across these ancient civilizations thought about gender roles and who held the power.

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).

As the focus of worship moved from goddesses to male gods, women and nature faced a double blow. Men, wielding more power, began to dominate and exploit both. Janis Birkland argues that this new patriarchal system led to a disrespectful attitude towards the Earth. Spirituality, once focused on honoring nature, became "earth-disdaining" (Birkland, 47). This shift in mindset caused a separation from the natural world and created a hierarchy where humans were dominant. This approach undermined any chance of a sustainable and holistic relationship with the environment, making it difficult for societies to function in harmony with nature.

In "Chemmeen," Chakki, the protagonist Karuthamma's mother, represents the traditional fisherwoman. Deeply rooted in the community's seafaring ways, she acts as a guardian of old knowledge and expectations for women. Chakki fiercely upholds these traditions, seeing them as timeless wisdom that ensures the survival and cultural identity of their fishing clan. In her words:

As the first fisherman ventured alone into the unknown, battling waves and currents on a wooden vessel, his wife gazed westward, her heart filled with prayer for his safe return. The sea raged, its waves towering, while monstrous whales lurked beneath the surface. The sharks charged the boat with their tails. The current dragged the boat into a terrible whirlpool. But he escaped from everything miraculously How did the boat escape the whirlpool? How did these perilous encounters end? The text suggests these miraculous escapes occurred due to the steadfast prayers of the fisherman's wife on shore. Her purity and devotion are implied as the force that protected him from the sea's wrath (Chemmeen 6).

The women of the fishing community are depicted as living within an unyielding fortress of customs and taboos that have persevered for generations, solidifying their collective identity and self-esteem (9). This metaphorical fortress signifies the deep-rooted adherence to strict cultural norms, where any deviation, especially by women, is viewed as a threat to the community's stability and reputation along the seafloor. Chakki, Karuthamma's mother, consistently underscores the rigid and unfair expectations imposed on women in their society. Karuthamma herself becomes a poignant symbol of the hardships endured by women in conservative communities. Despite their pivotal role in providing for their households as fisherwomen, they are restricted by societal rules that forbid marriages outside their community, punishable by harsh verbal and physical consequences. Karuthamma's inner turmoil is palpable in her relationship with Pareekutti, a Muslim fish trader whom she deeply loves but must keep at arm's length due to societal restrictions. She grapples with the inevitable complications even if she were to marry a Hindu fisherman, illustrating the intricate emotional and social pressures she faces.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's portrayal of the fishing community in "Chemmeen" highlights the integral role of women, such as Chakki, who not only manage domestic responsibilities but also contribute significantly to the family's income. When the fishing boats return ashore in the afternoon, the women, carrying their baskets, head to the seashore to engage in fish-selling activities. Chakki, a dedicated wife supporting her husband's ambitions, articulates the dual role of fisherwomen: "All these days, for the sake of your boat and net, I went selling fish in the east" (18).This depiction underscores how fisherwomen balance household duties with economic responsibilities, reinforcing their essential position in sustaining the family's livelihood. Vandana Shiva further argues 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 labor force which characterize most rural women's livelihood strategy. Recent gender studies indicate that women in India are primary contributors to food production, excelling in terms of quantity, value, and hours invested. (166)

After Karuthamma's forced marriage to Palan, she rediscovers her inner strength as a fisherwoman. Just like other women in the community, she starts selling fish to contribute to the family income. As the novel says, "Karuthamma's strength, too, awakened. "Her life, like others in her community, was inextricably linked to the ocean's bounty." (Chemmeen 132).

In "Chemmeen," Karuthamma's father, Chemban Kunju, is an ambitious fisherman who breaks with tradition and bends moral codes. He dreams of owning his own boats and nets, a desire that fuels his work on other men's vessels for years. Chemban Kunju is a shrewd businessman, staying clear of debt and even exploiting Pareekutti's love for Karuthamma to secure a large loan. Despite knowing Chemban Kunju wouldn't accept him as a son-in-law due to community customs, Pareekutti gives in to Chemban Kunju's greed. This blind trust and ambition lead to disaster for Pareekutti, who loses his business and livelihood. The novel highlights the tragic consequences of such choices.

Chemban Kunju, a member of the Mukkuvan caste historically barred from boat ownership, defies tradition through bribery to acquire a boat. However, once his coveted catch of prawns comes in, he reveals a rapacious nature, avoiding Pareekutti when approached for trading. Chemban Kunju's newfound pride blinds him to his humanity, described vividly by Chakki as, "When he saw the fish, he was transformed into the devil himself" (Chemmeen 43).

Chemban Kunju breaks a crucial maritime law. This law dictates that fishermen share a portion of their catch, called uppa (small fish), with the poor who collect leftovers from each boat. Chemban Kunju, however, refuses to follow this tradition. He denies the uppa not only to the general poor, but even to his own daughter, Panchami, who expects her share by right. The novel emphasizes the importance of this custom through a description of the indigenous law: "The haul obtained from the sea had grown naturally, without anyone sowing seeds or nurturing it. A portion of this catch rightfully belonged to the poor who collected cast-off fish. This was the maritime law" (42).

"Chemmeen" highlights Chemban Kunju's defiance of a central tenet in the fishing community. Traditionally, fishermen abstain from fishing during the sacred menstrual period associated with the sea goddess. However, Kunju's rebellious nature often leads him to disregard this taboo and continue his fishing activities. One day, the sea dramatically changed color, turning a deep red. The fishermen interpreted this as a sign that the sea goddess was menstruating. For some days after that there would be no fish in the sea. After two or three days of idleness Chemban Kunju could not keep quiet. He gathered his crew on the boat to discuss the situation. None of them would give him an answer there and then. It was very rare 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)

"Chemmeen" contrasts the traditional values of the fishing community with the relentless pursuit of personal gain embodied by Chemban Kunju. During sacred periods when fishing is prohibited, like the sea goddess's menstrual cycle, boat owners are expected to support their workers. However, Kunju's disregard for this custom pushes his workers' families to the brink of desperation, ultimately forcing them to defy the taboo themselves. Unlike his cautious peers, Kunju's audacious gamble to fish during the prohibited period pays off with a lucrative catch, including a prestigious shark. This incident starkly reveals his ambition and contempt for tradition, even at the potential cost to others.

"Even when the sea seemed barren, Chemban Kunju could make money. The old ones were defeated and kept quiet. The women expressed their gratitude to Chemban Kunju, stating that his efforts had enabled them to eat." (Chemmeen 52)

Despite their ancestral reverence for nature, many indigenous cultures grapple with the pressures of modern life. The pursuit of material gain and personal advancement can sometimes supersede traditional values, leading to environmental exploitation. This erosion of spiritual connection can result in behaviors that prioritize economic growth over ecological well-being.

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 behavior. Human behavior is a complex interplay of conscious thought and unconscious patterns. Deeply rooted habits formed through childhood experiences, societal influences, and institutional norms often shape actions in ways that diverge from stated beliefs. This discrepancy between intention and behavior is evident across all aspects of life, from interpersonal relationships to global policies. (47).

Chemban Kunju presents a complex character that outwardly adheres to the traditional ways of the seafront community. However, this façade belies his opportunistic nature. A stark example of this is his blatant disregard for the customary fishing moratorium, a practice essential for marine ecosystem health. While others respect this tradition, Kunju prioritizes immediate financial benefits over the long-term sustainability of their livelihood.

ChembanKunju's dishonesty leads to Pareekutti's financial ruin, forcing him into impoverished isolation as he pines for an unattainable love. Obsessed with wealth, power, and expanding his fleet, ChembanKunju neglects his familial responsibilities, including marrying off his daughter Karuthamma, whose unmarried status is considered a threat to the community. When pressured to address this issue, he hastily arranges a marriage to an unsuitable outsider. ChembanKunju's domineering behavior aligns with patriarchal structures as described by Janis Birkeland, where gender is hierarchically divided and women are often associated with nature and undervalued. In Chemmeen, societal expectations converge on Karuthamma, a nineteen-year-old woman whose unmarried status is viewed as a social and familial stigma. The community of Neerkunnam exerts pressure on Chemban Kunju to remedy this perceived "problem." In response, he hastily arranges a marriage for Karuthamma with Palani, an orphan fisherman from a neighboring village. This decision, however, is met with disapproval from the community, who consider Palani an unsuitable match for Karuthamma. Chemban Kunju's assertive and controlling behavior in this situation exemplifies the patriarchal power dynamics described by Janis Birkeland.

"Chemban Kunju's attempts to dominate and control others reflect the patriarchal norms that subordinate women. His prioritization of personal ambition over the autonomy and well-being of others is indicative of a broader societal power imbalance." His actions underscore the power dynamics within the fishing community, where traditional customs and gender roles intersect with economic and social pressures"

Dominant patriarchal cultures often construct gender as a binary hierarchy, privileging masculinity over femininity. Within this framework, women have historically been associated more closely with nature and the earth, often linked to their reproductive roles. (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 Chemban Kunju prioritizes economic progress and a lavish lifestyle, showing little regard for the sea goddess and the community's staunch belief systems. Shortly after his wife Chakki's death, he marries Pappikunju, widow of Kandan Koran from whom he purchased his first boat. This marriage appears driven by his desire to emulate Kandan Koran's affluent life and attractive wife. However, Pappikunju becomes a curse rather than a fulfillment of his aspirations. Unlike Chakki, who supported him steadfastly, Pappikunju's actions clash with Chemban Kunju's ambitions, leading to her abandonment and destitution as "a helpless woman wandering homeless on the seashore" (Chemmeen 150). Chemban Kunju's defiance of traditional beliefs and customs contributes to his descent into chaos and disharmony, exacerbated by his disregard for maritime laws. During a discussion among fishermen about the consequences of someone from the wrong caste owning a boat, the elderly Raman Muppan predicts their eventual failure. Chemban Kunju's prosperous ventures eventually fail, and he is left wandering the seashore, his mental state deteriorating. As described in the novel, "From the side of that boat, the terrible laughter of Chemban Kunju emanated. It was like the laughter of death" (Chemmeen 159). Chemban Kunju's downfall underscores the repercussions of disregarding natural and cultural laws, leading to personal and communal discord. Chaia Heller's insights ring true in Chemban Kunju's tragic trajectory:

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. In exchange for genuine, passionate love, we've been given superficial substitutes, with romance used merely as a garnish. 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)

Chemban Kunju's relationship with the natural world in "Chemmeen" is characterized by a desire to exploit rather than nurture. His approach reflects a repression of destructive impulses rather than a constructive engagement with nature through creativity and cooperation. By exploiting the sea solely for personal gain, he overlooks the potential for humans to interact harmoniously with nature and society. In contrast to this view, Chemban Kunju embodies a modern archetype of self-serving consumption, disregarding both indigenous beliefs and women's emotions as inconsequential. Despite the community's reverence for a female deity, it upholds a patriarchal social order that marginalizes feminine principles and imposes restrictive taboos on women, upheld even by elderly women. This masculine ethos is deeply internalized within their social institutions and individual psyches. Chemban Kunju's disregard for women's feelings and his attempt to dominate the sea goddess mirror insights from ecofeminism, which posits that attitudes toward women and nature are interconnected. According to Janis Birkeland: "Ecofeminists argue that values and actions are intertwined: genuine care necessitates action. Although ecofeminist theory emerged in the 1970s, its practical applications have gained momentum worldwide" (19).

Across societies, regardless of social standing, men often wield power over women within their own families, even when that power is absent in the wider world. "Chemmeen" exemplifies this dynamic. Not only does the ambitious Chemban Kunju exploit and control the women around him, but even the impoverished Achankunju resorts to violence against his wife as their family faces starvation. This reinforces ecofeminist

scholar Janis Birkeland's assertion that dismantling the exploitation of both nature and humanity are inextricably linked (Birkeland, 22).

MartiKheel's argument regarding the importance of co-existence strengthens the understanding of the interconnectedness between social justice and environmental well-being:

Ecofeminists and other nature writers often emphasize the importance of a "holistic worldview," which posits that all life is interconnected. 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 wellbeing 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 story, we observe a deterioration in his relationships with both nature and women, which reflects a broader issue: the pervasive domination of men over both nature and femininity. This phenomenon devalues the intrinsic worth of nature and femininity, contributing significantly to the depletion of our natural resources. Many feminist theorists argue that this male-centered domination perpetuates harmful hierarchical binaries and gender relations, leading to theoretical and practical disasters. Unless we address and overcome these power imbalances globally, the preservation of nature will remain a daunting challenge, potentially accelerating our planet towards an ecological catastrophe.

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