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The Rigidity of Caste and Religious Barriers in T.S Pillai' *Chemmeen*: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper expresses the aspirations, struggle and grief in the lives of the fisherman of Kerala. The tragedy of the poor fisherman has been depicted on the epical scale. *Chemmeen* attains the stature of a tragedy on a striking, epical level by weaving individual heartbreak into the elemental, unbending forces of nature and myth. It is a great novel from different angles. The tragedy of the poor fisherman has been depicted on the epical scale. Chemmeen tells the story of the relationship between Karuthamma, the daughter of a Hindu fisherman, and Pareekutti, the son of a Muslim fisherman. The enormously successful novel was adapted into a film of the same name, and won critical acclaim and commercial success. This paper explores the conflict between traditional customs and modernism within a fisherman society in Kerala. This paper examines the exploitation of laborers and the social inequalities.

Keywords: aspirations, struggle, caste, traditions goodness and love

INTRODUCTION

The novel Chemmeen originally written in Malyalam by T.S Pillai has emerged as a powerful work and as an important social document. Chemmeen is Pillai's best novel which expresses the aspirations, struggle and grief in the lives of the fishermen of Kerala. In it, the novelist provides a realistic and a candid picture of his contemporary society. Pilai's portrayal of the struggle and frustration of the fishing community is highly realistic. He exposes the hollowness and the futility of outdated customs and meaningless traditions. He also provides and in-depth study of human mind and heat. His psychological realism probes deeper into the minds and hearts of his characters. He presents human relationship in their real and true colours. The tension and struggle between head and heart in the lives of the protagonists like Karuthamma and Pareekutti constitutes the leading theme of the novel.

Chemmeen can be said to be a tragedy of beliefs, traditions, goodness and love on a grand scale. Throught the novel, the tragic tone is not allowed to be subdued. It may not be a real psychological yet the suffering and anguish of protagonists evoke deep sympathies of the readers. Before discussing Chemmeen as a tragedy, it would be worthwhile to have a clear idea about the origin and background of the concept of tragedy. The novel which centers around a forbidden love story between a Hindu fisherman's daughter and a Muslim man in a Kerala seaside community positively lived up to its billing. It is written in beautiful yet realistic discourse intertwined with the on a daily basis life and myths of the seafaring community of Kerala. The society and family rejected Karuthamma's and Pareekutty's love because of their tradition.

In Greek language, the term tragedy has been derived from the word 'tragoidia' which means he goat or she goat which stands for Greek play writer. Aristotle in his treatise on poetry and drama defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in a language beautiful in different parts with different kinds of embellishments through actions and not narrations and through scenes of pity and fear brining about the Catharsis of these emotions." This means that but it need not end in a disaster. Tragedy for Aristotle meant the arousal of the emotions of pity ad fear, thereby bringing about the process of Catharsis which is the source of tragic pleasure (artistic pleasure) arising out of the tragic scene.

This releases tension from the minds of the spectators. Among the ancient Greek dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have been the greatest writers of tragedies. They believed that greater the suffering depicted, the more intense aesthetic experience would be. This would result in an emotional cure. "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).

"The novel was an immediate success although the critical reaction was mixed. Some critics wrote that the novel is the best social novel written in Malayalam since O. Chandhu Menon's Sarada. Some thought that the central cord of superstition is a myth. Some critics wrote that the novel shows Thakazhi's decline as a progressive writer, as the story of Chemmeen is essentially romantic and does not bring in class struggle like Thakazhi's earlier novels Thottiyude Makan or Randidangazhi" (George, K. M.178) Pillai's storytelling draw near in 'Chemmeen' radically contributes to the novel's emotional depth through its lyrical tale structure.

In Greek tragedy, the dominating factor has been destiny and chance as in Oedipus Tyrannus by Sophocles. Aristotle in his poetics explains the cause of the fall of the tragic hero and calls it ' hamritia' (an error in Judgement), but it was never applied in Greek tragedies where destiny was the decisive factor. Later, the great Elizabethans, Marlowe and Shakespeare employed 'hamrtia' in their plays to show and justify the fall of the protagonist. "The novel acquires the quality of a fable in which life in the fishermen's community is depicted with great emotional detail. The customs, taboos, beliefs, rituals and the day-to-day business of living through the pain of stark existence come alive magically through Thakazhi's pen" (en.wikipedia.org/wiki)

Dante called tragedy an unhappy tale. During the middle ages, Tragedy curiously changed its meaning in landmark contexts. Elizabethan drama is an important masterpiece like Dr. Faustus, Tamburlaine, Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Romeo and Juliet and many more. Chemmeen tells the story of the relationship between Karutthamma, a Hindu woman from the fisher folk community, and Pareekkutty, the son of a Muslim fish wholesaler. Unable to live with the man she loves, Karutthamma marries Palani, who, despite the scandal about his wife's past, never stops trusting her, a trust that is reaffirmed each time he goes to sea and comes back safe since the 'sea-mother' myth among the fishermen community goes that the safe return of a fisherman depends on the fidelity of his wife.

One remarkable feature heroic of the Greek and Elizabethan tragedies has been the heroic figure from royal families was capable of reaching height and dignity of the classical tragic hero. There to be certain qualifications of the classical tragic hero who is capable of attaining the Aristotelean concept of heroic tragedy is in fact 'a residue of the epic/' but with the changing contexts, the concepts of tragedy has undergone immense change. Now the concept of tragedy has also been employed in novel also. Novel is more accurate and closer in depicting the realities of life. Tragedy has been defined by the classicists in terms of transcendence. In real life is due to illusion about reality. There cannot be transcendence. Earlier, a heroic personality was considered to be fit for a tragic subject but now the common man has become the hero of the tragedy. He is also capable of transcending his limitations. Thus the concept of tragedy in modern times has finally outlasted the heroic concept of tragedy evolved by the ancient Greek classical masters. We have tragedies of common man like the old and the Sea, death of a Selesman, Chemmeen, Kanthapura etc.

The novel Chemmeen is a tragedy of the poor fishermen and women living on the coastal areas of Kerala. They are easy victims of moneylenders of the villages exploit. They and the helpless fishermen never hope for a bright future. These poor people are fatalists. They just exist and depart from the arena. Their poor economic condition and superstitions are the main causes of their misery. Rigid caste considerations and an unshakable belief in age-old notions of morality are also responsible for their tragedy. The main protagonists Parrekutti and Karuthamma cannot because a Muslim boy can never marry a girl from the fishing community. Almost all the characters in the narrative believe in the power of destiny and rarely engage themselves in a battle against odd circumstances. Age –old traditions and taboos are too powerful for them. The untold sufferings of Pareekutti and Karuthamma bear tragic tone. One finds that the novelist has not fully delineated the psychological exploration of the mind and heart of his characters.

Chemmeen is not a pure psychological tragedy like of Human Bondage or Sons and lovers. Here characterization lacks that excessive reflective-ness which reveals the inner workings of human mind. Untold suffering of Karuthamma, Pareerkutti, Chakki and Chemmeen evoke a feeling of sympathy for them. But it remains a tragedy of the fishing community as well. The social concerns dominating in the lives of various characters. Chemmeen truly portrays the miserable plight of the poor fishermen. It is also a tragedy of traditions and religious beliefs. The people are shown as steeped in poverty and ignorance. They seem to be satisfied with their religious beliefs and traditions. Very few characters are aware of the hollowness and futility of orthodox way of life. The villagers have an unshaken belief in the Goddess Katalamma who dwells in the depths of the sea. She is annoyed when someone violates the moral codes. They believe that the prayers of their chaste wives on the seashore will ensure their safe return from the turbulent sea. Women are afraid of the anger of the goddess. They can never think of losing their chastity for the safe return of their husbands. Pareekutti and Karuthamma find these age-old beliefs as meaningless. Thus the novel emerges as a tragedy of the poor fishermen on a grand scale. The tragedy reaches its

climax in the death of the two protagonists (Karuthamma and Pareekutti)In the last part of the novel. The allusion to the Arundhati star has been made in an ironic vein. Here irony has been used as a powerful device in dealing with the theme of the novel. The tragedy tone has been maintained throughout the novel. Thus, the novel Chemmeen is a tragedy with Pillai's imaginative understanding of the disintegration of traditional beliefs and religious values.

CONCLUSION

Chemmeen is the realistic fictional tragedy which focuses on the lifestyle of early fisherman folk in Kerala, in southern part of India. This is eye-catching in Chemmeen, where the fisher folk society is intensely aware of their Myth and culture. The narrative follows Karuthamma and Pareekutty, whose love is disillusioned by community norms, leading to tragic consequences. It is not the tragic love connecting Karuthamma and Parikutty, but the stark economic, social and realities of the subaltern life. Novelist depicted the fundamentals of misogyny and patriarchal beliefs that permeate the fisher folk community. *Chemmeen* reveals the compassion for the downtrodden. It highlights the various socio-cultural issues.

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