

***Chemmeen* - Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai**

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912 – 1999), popularly known as Thakazhi after his place of birth, is an Indian novelist and short story writer of Malayalam literature. He wrote over 30 novels and novellas and over 600 short stories focusing on the lives of the oppressed classes. Known for his works such as *Kayar* (Cair, 1978) and *Chemmeen* (Prawns, 1956), Pillai was a recipient of the Padma Bhushan, the third highest Indian civilian award. He was also a recipient of the Njanapeedam, India's highest literary award, awarded in 1984 for the novel *Kayar*.

Chemmeen, which was written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in 1956, is a passionate love story set in the backdrop of the coastal areas of Kerala. It is primarily the tale of a young woman – Karuthamma – the daughter of a Hindu fisherman Chembankunju, who falls in love with Pareekutty – the son of a Muslim fish trader. Due to their religious and social differences, and the rules of the sea, their love is nipped in the bud and Karuthamma marries Palani, an orphan fisherman.

The story is of Karuthamma and Pareekutti, she the daughter of a poor fisherman, and he the son of a fairly successful trader. 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 by getting help from Pareekutti. The young man goes bankrupt while Chembankunju, purchasing his first boat and nets, is on the way to comparative wealth. Karuthamma is given in marriage to a visiting fisherman, Palani, and goes to live in his village. Chembankunju had bought his first boat from Kandankoran, a man of higher "caste" whom Chembankunju admired for his wealth, bearing and somewhat extravagant life-style. Chembankunju's wife dies and so does Kandankoran: thereupon, the aspiring fisherman marries the widow. But the marriage is not a success; Chembankunju's health and drive falter, and his enterprise declines. His only other child, a daughter, estranged over her father's second marriage, moves out of the house. Chembankunju, his life now in ruins, without aims and orientation, belatedly repays a small portion of the money he had borrowed from Pareekutti. But the money now has no use to Pareekutti either: he is given to haunting the beach alone, singing, his sanity suspect.

Pareekutti walks to Karuthamma's village, presumably to give her the money forced upon him by her father. When he arrives, it is late in the night and Palani is out at sea. Love compounded with great pity overcomes Karuthamma's moral conditioning. Out at sea, Palani struggles with a huge shark he has baited and looks in vain for Arundhati (guiding star of fisherman and symbol of chastity) as a giant whirlpool forms and waves become mountainous. He cries out to his wife (the fisherman's traditional guardian angel) to pray for him: "The lives of the men at sea are in the hands of the women on shore." The primordial fisherman, on a piece of wood, had escaped because ashore "a chaste and pure woman" had prayed steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea. But Karuthamma is in the arms of Pareekutti, and Palani is dragged down to the abode of Katalamma, the sea goddess. The lovers by the sea are swept out and drowned by an outraged ocean.

Characters : Chembankunju - A Dishonest Fisherman, Chakki - Spouse of Chembankunju

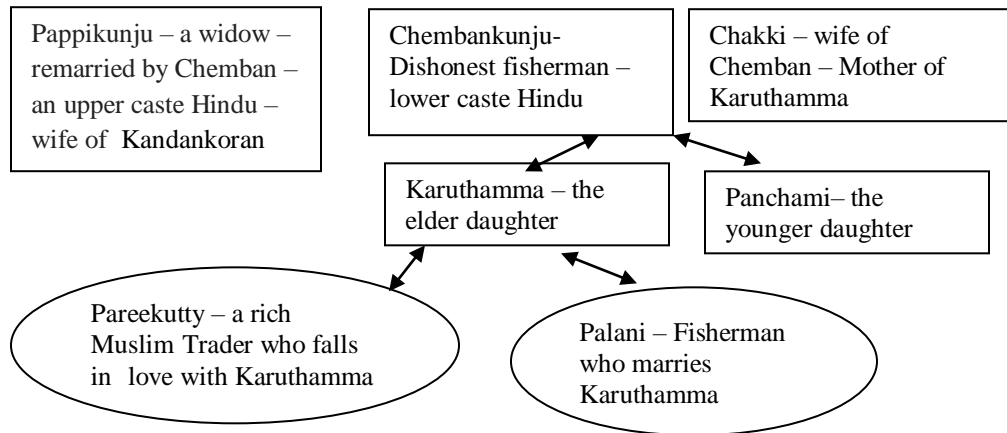
Pareekutti - Muslim Trader who falls in love with Karuthamma

Karuthamma - Daughter of Chembankunju

Palani - Fisherman who marries Karuthamma, Panchami - Chembankunju's younger daughter.

The story is centered on a myth by which the fishing folk of that area live. The myth says that a fisherman's life is protected by the chastity of his wife. If his wife is unfaithful, the Mother Sea (Kadamma) will take his life. The ending of the novel makes you wonder if there is any truth to

all the myths we have been fed all our lives. The final scene of the book, which has a young girl crying with grief on the sea-side, with a baby in her arms, leaves a haunting image for the readers



T. S. Pillai, who was associated with the socialist movement in Kerala, portrays through Chemban the powerful attractions of money and the ruthless, competitive nature that the free enterprise system sometimes breeds. Chemban rejects his past and his people, and instead collaborates with the exploiters. Like the traders and moneylenders, at times of economic distress, Chemban buys ornaments and household goods from his desperate neighbors at outrageously low prices.

Justification of the title *Chemmeen*: To turn to another dimension of the novel and to its title, as the shrimps (chemmeen) are tossed on the waves of the ocean, so man is tossed on the waves of the Ocean of Transmigration (Samsara Sagara). The tragic end places man in the Shakespearean perspective of flies to wanton gods but counterpoised to this awareness is the realization that god in one of his ten avatars (incarnations) took the form of a fish. Thus man is defined paradoxically both as negligible and as of profound significance. Like the waves, man repeatedly dies and arises in unceasing combinations of new forms.

The use of symbols (imagery) -Sea as a Symbol: The sea serves as a symbol of the unrelenting fate. Karuthamma and Pareekutti grows up on the beach, their first love scene is blessed by calm, Moonlight Sea, murmuring love songs. The furious sea marks her marriage day. A similar furious sea marks the end of the story, the tragic night of their death. The storm that rages in the sea outside represents the storm of passion which rages in the hearts of the lovers who sacrifice their lives to fulfill their love in death. Death unites the two lovers whose union is prohibited by the characters. Thus Thakazhi makes use of the sea as a powerful symbol in interweaving the theme in the narrative of Chemmeen in an artistic manner.

Arundati Star: The novelist employs the symbol of the 'Arundhati' star to heighten the tragic effect of the narrative. In Hindu mythology, Arundhati is the wife of a great sage and she herself is a symbol of chastity. The symbol of chastity has been employed ironically hinting at the love-fulfilled and tragically thwarted in the end of the novel. One single star came out and shone. It was the fisherman's Arundhati, the star which showed them their way, but that night the star seemed to lack in luster. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's use of symbol is highly convincing. The natural objects and other things like a boat, flower, sea water, the seasonal cycle, fish, moon, flute, and beach have been used as powerful symbols further intensifying the agony and the tragedy of tradition and love.

Chemmeen is not only a story of tragic, young love, but raises issues of individual morality and action; economic conduct; social cohesion and theological belief.