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Myth as the Factor of Marginalisation in Chemmeen

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Abstract:

Many factors are responsible for the marginalisation of people in society. One such factor is the myth or superstitious beliefs. The practices and beliefs that are prevalent in a particular society, when misunderstood, become the primary factor in creating marginalisation among the people. When the people get marginalised, they also become the subaltern whose voice would become unvoiced. This paper attempts to bring out one of such factors through *Chemmeen*, an award-winning Malayalam novel written by T.S.Pillai.

Keywords: subaltern, stereotype, marginalisation, myth.

The development of science has created more awareness among the people regarding gender equality. However, history has had many boundaries within which women had to limit themselves from asserting their equality against men. The authors and works of the times have also recorded many such limitations. Such

works give readers some clear cut ideas about the treatment of women during the particular period. So the reflections of the society in the literary works provide many critics to analyse the merits and demerits of certain practices in the society. One such work that has recorded the subalternity of women in the fishing community of Thiruvanthapuram, the capital city of Kerala in the mid-twentieth century, is *Chemmeen*, written by Thakali Sivasankara Pillai. This work can be considered a chronicle that reminds us of Karuthamma, Chakki and Pappikunju, who represent subalternity in the fishing community. These women characters are not just single particular characters but represent the women in the fishing community from the particular area.

Throughout the novel, the female character Chakki, the mother of Karuthamma, the protagonist, acts as the agent of creating her daughter as a stereotype of gender. In the particular fishing community, the women have to wait for the husband with chastity until their husbands return from the sea after fishing. Else, the sea goddess (Kadalamma as they

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call the sea) would consume the girl's husband to punish her for committing adultery. This myth also acts as an agent of creating gender stereotypes among the people. According to this mythology, women are supposed to remain pure and true to their husband even when he is not in the home with his wife. This is an excellent way to make a genuine relationship between couples. At the same time, this myth also paves the way for the subalternity of the women in the community. No voices of women were respected in the particular community, as portrayed by the author Pillai.

The fishing community people depend on the sea for their livelihood, and they are too religious. So they follow different rituals and myths to please the sea and other natural resources around them. As these rituals and myths were created a long ago, most of the practices became superstitions as the reasons for such practices were forgotten. When superstitious beliefs overtake radical thinking, there arises subalternity, and that subalternity would also create a marginalization in the society. All practices in a community cannot be considered superstitious beliefs as most of them are scientifically constructed by our ancestors for the welfare of humankind. Since most of the practices were created by men, some of the practices were falsely understood by the people who came later, making people think that women are the weaker sex. As

most of the later people could not understand the reasons behind such practices, they blindly believed in such practices. When people started to believe those practices blindly, such practices became superstitions. Until then, such practices would have been followed for some scientific reasons. Once the reasons for the practices were forgotten, the people started to follow such practices as traditional and not reasonable behaviour.

Here, in this novel, the fishing community people have been following a myth for generations. This myth was introduced to these people to preserve the chastity of the women from the community when their husbands were away from them. However, this myth itself has become one of the significant factors that have promoted the marginalisation of women in the particular community. This myth is carried over generations by the same gender through their daughters. Whenever Karuthamma tries to think and meet Pareekutty, her mother Chakki would control her by reminding her about the traditions and practices in their fishing community and make her daughter a typical fishing community woman. Hence women become the main factor in transferring most of the practices to their successors.

After the death of Chakki, Chembankunju marries Pappikunju and brings her home. This makes Panchami fear

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that her second mother would torture her. Nevertheless, she could not do anything against her father. Even when she tried to convey her fear to her father Chembankunju, she could not make any successful attempt as her father's only wish was to make more money.

Every character in the novel acts as an agent of creating stereotypes in society. This stereotyping is the primary key to the creation of marginalisation in society. Stereotyping kills the uniqueness of an individual and takes society to a monotonous way of living. Whether it is a male or a female character, the author has created both genders of characters to represent the true faces of the people in society.

Many authors have given way to the development of women. One such author is Virginia Woolf, who, in one of her works, *A Room of One's Own*, says that a woman needs a room on her own and a pen and a paper to express herself. However, in the novel *Chemmeen*, the female characters have no separate room or value for their voice. Their voices were always on mute mode, though it was the wealthy Pappikunju or the poor Chakki. Gender and the economic status of the person become the value of the person. The whole fishing community of the particular coast of Thiruvananthapuram had to obey the orders of the shore master, and all the women had

to obey their husbands. It is not a false sign of a male-dominated society until the voices of women are heard.

In her *The Second Sex*, Simon De Beauvoir has deconstructed the idea of women being the 'other'. This novel serves as an example of what Simon de Beauvoir has explained in her work mentioned above is true. All the women characters in *Chemmeen*, namely, Chakki, Karuthamma, Pappikunju, Panchami, etc., were treated as the other and had no voice. Even though the women in the novel can understand the situations, they cannot react to any situation unless they are permitted to do so. They became the subalterns in their community.

As portrayed by the author, men also act as the agents of transferring such practices throughout the community. When the men from the same community came to know Karuthamma had an affair with Pareekutty, they were afraid to take Palani, Karuthamma's husband, for fishing. If they took Palani with them, they feared that the sea goddess would consume them. Even though Karuthamma, after marriage with Palani, did not even think of Pareekutty, everyone in their seashore believed that she still had some fondness and affection for Pareekutty. So she has an affair with him. This is reflected in their speeches, and it reaches the ears of Palani. Though Palani tried not to suspect his wife, the situation forced him to do so. In the beginning, when

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his fellow mates refuse to take Palani with them, he manages to buy a new fishing vessel for himself and does not do anything against his wife for his situation. Later, when Pareekutty came to inform Karuthamma of her mother's death, everyone in the seashore began to gossip that Pareekutty came to make love with Karuthamma. This also reaches the ears of Palani, who gets angry at the incident. Even though the readers could understand that Karuthamma was concerned for her little boss (Kochu Mudhalali), she has no affair with him after her marriage to Palani. When Karuthamma defended the charges made against her, Palani refused to believe. When Palani does this, again and again, Karuthamma feels that her voice has become invaluable, and at the end of the novel, she decides to share her with Pareekutty.

At last, proving the myth of Kadalamma, Palani was consumed by a whirlwind and washed ashore dead. Pareekutty and Karuthamma were also

washed ashore dead at the end, which the author has made as a punishment not to the couple but to the society that failed to respect the true love of Karuthamma. The readers can decide whether the death of Palani happened because of the infidelity of Karuthamma or was just a coincidence.

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