



Love, Caste and Custom in *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai

Dr. Naresh Rathee

Associate Professor of English

CRA College, Sonapat

M. No. 9416974004

Email: narrathi@gmail.com

Abstract: *Chemmeen* is a novel written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. It was originally written in Malayalam and got published in 1956 under the same title. It got name and fame to the author. It won the National Sahitya Akadami Award in 1958. I was also adapted into a Malayalam film of the same title in 1965 which has celebrated its 50th Anniversary of the classical movie in 2015. It has been translated into as many as seventeen languages of the world. It was translated into English by Anita Nair in 2011. The novel portrays the love between Pareekutty and Karuthamma, a young couple, who love each other truly. The first belongs to Muslim community while the latter comes from the Hindu folk. Their love could not touch the heights of fulfillment because the girl was married to Palani who happens to be an orphan. The novel also discusses the emotional aspects of the love-triangle where true love has to win at last. Like many of the love stories in the

world this novel also ends with death of the true lovers. They could not be united in this cruel world but they die with the impending hope that they will unite in the next world.

Keywords: Fisherman, Boat, Net, Sea, Storm, Water, Death, Hindu, Muslim.

The Research Paper: *Chemmeen* tells the story of love-relationship between Karuthamma, the daughter of a Hindu fisherman and Pareekutty, the son of a Muslim fish-wholesaler at Neerukunnath sea-shore in Kerala. Chembankunju lives there in a hovel with his wife Chakki and two daughters . . . Karuthamma and Panchami. He is a good fisherman of considerable social status at the shore. His aim in life is to own a boat and nets but he could not fulfill his dream because of low income from the fishing business. Karuthamma comes to know about the longing desire of her father. One day she goes to the sea-shore and sees Pareekutty there. She calls him ‘Bossman’ respectfully. She goes to him and speaks out her inner thought that “the father of mine talks of buying a boat and nets. . . . But there isn't enough money. Do you think you could give us some?” (Pillai 3).

Pareekutty's father Abdullah has established himself as a fish trader and now he gives advances to the fishermen who want to sell the catch to him only. Karuthamma knows that Pareekutty can help her father with the money which is required to buy a boat and nets. He considers his demand seriously and makes his mind to give the required money to Chembankunju. After the loan's discussion, Pareekutty and Karuthamma begin to cast comments on each-other and start laughing. Panchami, the latter's younger sister senses some unusual hatred and tells her mother Chakki all about Pareekutty and Karuthamma that how they talk to each other and laugh.

Chakki discerns that her daughter has become young and marriageable. She warns Karuthamma, "He is not one of us. A Muslim. And he probably doesn't realize any of this" (9). Chakki tells her that Pareekutty belong to Islam and she is a Hindu, so it is shameful to laugh with a Muslim boy because he "being a Mohammadan and thus also an untouchable from the orthodox Hindu point of view." (Anand 42). In Hinduism, the fisherfolk has been included as untouchables. Thus they are Dalits. They always marry their daughters to the man of their own caste or subcaste. In Hinduism marriages are allowed within the caste. And if someone violates this social custom, then that person faces many social discriminations and defamations. Thus Chembankunju and Chakki are conscious enough about the marriage system of their community. They are familiar with the consequences of the inter-communal marriages. It is considered shameful if a man marry his daughter to someone who belongs to different community. And it becomes very sever in the case of the lower castes. They face more impediments in this way if such marriages are allowed to take place. Thus the parents of Karuthamma are attentive of her relations with Pareekutty, the Muslim boy. So Chakki warns her daughter and says, "He is not one of us" (9). It means that he does not belong to her own caste although he also belongs to the fishing community.

Many of the communities of the world have built some blocks for their social securities. They are not interested to intermingle with other communities so much that their own social identification goes away and disappear in that intimacy. Thus they have developed some norms and customs regarding marriages. A marriage with caste is considered a good me, while our side the caste is mostly looked with hatred or disgust. Chakki's words echo in Karuthamma's ears for a long time. She feels guilty for her deeds. She comes to know that this is an "age old moral code of that community was vested in her too" (10). So she does not feel angry with Panchami who has

complained against her to their mother. When Chembankunju returns home Chakki tells him that their daughter has attained the age of marriage. He opines, "I know all that, women, you don't have to tell me. I am a father too!" (11). She reproves, "You are a father, are you? I am glad that you remember that! Your daughter will be led astray" (11). This is the shocking news to Chembankunju consequently he comes to brood over the situation. Then he comes up with a sad emotion and says, "I will have her married before that happens" (11). But Chakki has another disappointing piece in her mind and after contemplation she asks Chembankunju, "And how are you going to manage that? Who is going to marry her without money? (11). He gets astounded and becomes worried. She again snaps, "A Muslim man will end up seducing your daughter. That's what's going to happen" (11). After collecting many weak threads of strength to get up he assures Chakki, "I'll find someone. . . . Wait till you see . . . Wait" (12). Karuthamma has heard all their conversation as she was standing near the door. Her ears have been echoing the sentence spoken by her mother --- "A Muslim man will seduce your daughter" (12). She has discerned that she has committed a crime, which has been committed without the knowledge of its punishment. The inter-community love feelings will never be accepted in her finishing community of Hinduism.

One day Chembankunju's search for a suitable boy for his daughter comes to an end. He comes across a young man named Palani who happens to be an orphan. Karuthamma is married to Palani. She goes to his hovel. Palani's parents were died when he was a little boy. Somehow he manages to grow himself up. He has no knowledge of his caste and community. He knows only one thing about himself and that is his profession. And that is fishing at the sea-shore of Trikunnappuzha. To Chembankunju it has no importance because after all he is not a Muslim like Pareekutty.

The married life of Palani and Karuthamma comes ahead with many ups and downs but the past deeds of a girl are not easy to be got rid of them. Somehow Palani get the news that his wife was in love with a Muslim boy named Pareekutty. He feels anger and disgust for her. He does not allow her go to her home when Chakki dies. Chembankuju brings another woman after some days. Panchami feels hatred and wrath against her stepmother named Papikanju. She has a son named Gangaduttan who is a nothing-to-do kind of boy. He forces her mother to give him some money with which he can start some business of his own choice somewhere away from her. She steals two hundred rupees from the money borrowed by Chembankunju from Ousepchan and gives to Gangaduttan. He fleas from Trikunnapuzha forever. Panchami informs her father about the theft: Chembankuju throws Papikunju out of the house. She begs for mercy and he forgives her. Panchami feels upset and after some days she is found missing. Nobody knows about her where she has gone to. She goes to her sister Karuthamma at Trikunnapuzha.

Panchami tells about many incidents which have happened at Neerukumapuzha since she went from there after marriage. When Karuthamma asks about Pareekutty, she tells:

Pareekutty shack fell apart. It crumbled into dust. On that shore there had been other shacks and some that had been ruined. The ruined shacks owners were never seen again. But he continued to live on this shore. Didn't he have another place to go? Perhaps not. In the twilight he would be seen walking on that shore with a downcast face. As if he was searching for something lost among the grains of sand. Wasn't that truth? A life lost in the sand. It had

to be sought for and found

(215).

Karuthamma became sad. Her past memories came to her mind and begin to haunt her. "Could a Muslim shack owner be in love with a fisher girl?" (215). Although no one can deny it but at the same time no one endures if that happens to any girl of one's own. The same case is of Karuthamma and Pareekutty. Both have been facing the punishment from a long time. But unfortunately it is not reaching to its end. Pareekutty has lost his everything in the fire of that love while Karuthamma has also been a victim of the wrath of Chembankunju and Palani from a long time. She feels herself tired from the endurance of the punishment. One day she feels some unknown courage inside her body. Now she feels no fear of Palani who used to torment him. She begins to feel some force of attachment with Pareekutty. "A Pareekutty who had lost everything in life and now wandered through the shore like a mad man singing his song" (227-28). During their love-meetings once upon a time he has said, "I will always sing this song; I will sing this song so it is heard at Trikunnappuzha" (228). These words are resounded in Karuthamma's ears. Her chastity goes out. She feels herself inclined towards Pareekutty. She begins to confess that she was in love with Pareekutty. And moreover she begins to consider that she still loves him. This is the end of her chastity. The chastity of a fisherwoman. Now she has to be punished by the goddess of the sea. Her thoughts about Pareekutty begins to increase with the passage of the time. In a subconscious contemplation she thinks: -

Pareekutty was a nice man, a good man, a loving man. These were all definite facts. She couldn't forget Pareekutty in this life. Ever nor would she do so. Pareekutty was hers and she was his" (232). That's all. She begins to wait for him. She will heed his call. One night she hears

the sound of the song, Pareekutty used to sing. She gets up. She hears a call - 'Karuthamma.' "It was a call that came every night" (232). It was not Palani's voice surely. And:

The voice didn't ask her to open the door. Usually he would ask her to. But still she rose, opened the door and stepped out. . . . A clear moonlight spread and flowed around. There was no one out in the yard. She went towards the west of the house. Towards the shore. To gaze at the sea. A man stood in the moonlight. It was Pareekutty.

Karuthamma wasn't frightened; she didn't scream. She stood as if she had stepped out in response to his call. He walked slowly towards her. She looked at that figure carefully. This wasn't her Bossman. He had become very thin.

. . . They stood looking at each other. She had ruined this man who stood before her. Deep in her soul Karuthamma knew that he loved her and would do so forever. No matter what happened to him, no matter when and how, he would always love her. (232-33)

And:

In that brief moment, Karuthamma forgot all the disappointment of her life. She was not a defeated woman. . . . A man loved her. She would always be a beloved to him! And it was the one who loved her so standing before her.

She moved into his outstretched arms and laid herself against his chest. She raised her face to his. He whispered into her ears, 'My Karuthamma!'

'What, my dearest?'

His hands moved over those buttocks that once he, a Muslim, and the riff-raff of the shore had ogled at. (233)

After a long time of misery and trauma, the two lovers are before each-other. Pareekutty asks Karuthamma, "Who am I to you?' She cupped his face between her palms and with half-closed eyelids whispered, 'Who are you to me?' Why, you are my pot of gold!" (334). Once again they become one. "She wasn't able to break or move away from that embrace" (334). The next day Panchami is seen walking on the shore carrying the little girl on her bosom weeping. The little one is crying for its parents. The day passes itself and there is no news of Karuthamma and Palnai. Pareekutty has no place there is between them.

"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" (238). Palani also dies in the struggle to come across a whirlpool at the sea on the same day. The love of Pareekutty and Karuthamma has swallowed Palani also. It has killed Chakki too. Chembankunju turns mad because of his greed for money. Pachami and the little girl becomes orphan because of the love of Karuthamma and Pareekutty. This love has caused unexpected devastation in the life of the people mentioned in the novel. The novelist proposes no solution to this problem prevailing in the Hindu society whether the people belong to higher caste or lower caste, everywhere there are caste-barriers regarding social-intercourse.

Conclusion: It is mentioned in many of our scriptures that a man should marry a girl of his own caste. Our social customs also condemn inter-caste marriages and inter-community marriages forcefully. And it is observed in many cases that such kind of love affairs cause much harm to many families and many people who belong to the lovers and beloveds. But who can oppose the love feelings of a loveful heart. Many lovers in the world have been swallowed by the cruel customs of the society but love again and again finds its ways of death and devastation. Dalits are not untouched of the aftermaths of the cruelties of such affairs. They also face many problems in such cases. In case of the marriage, a father feels himself proud in marring his daughter within his own caste or community. Thus Chembankuju and Chakki try to follow that social custom for the sake of their social reputation. They are not aware of the consequences of the denial of the love relationship between Karuthamma and Pareekutty. A Brahman feels satisfaction in marrying his daughter with a Brahman boy and so is in the case of a fishing community. “The customs, the taboos, the beliefs, the rituals and the day-to-day business of living through the point of stark existence come alive magically through” the text of the novel (Malik 88).

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