

# An Exploration of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* in the Light of Awakening of Cultural Understanding and Food Provider

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## Abstract

Culture relates to the customs, ideas, social behavior, lifestyle, and way of life of a specific person or society. Works of literature entice us to comprehend the culture of specific groups. Culture varies according to religion, language, caste, and many other parameters. Some cultures are easily destroyed; simultaneously, some are intertwined with people and are very conscious of all that. This is conspicuous in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*, where the fisherfolk society is acutely aware of their Myth and culture. There was a belief that if a married woman committed adultery while her husband was at sea, the sea goddess (*kadamma*) would consume him. Food is a significant indicator of culture. The ocean serves food to the fisherman folk and acts as a channel for cultural awakening. This paper focuses primarily on awakening cultural understanding and the role of the sea as a food provider.

**Keywords:** Culture, Food, Love, Fisherfolk, Sea

## Introduction

Literature can be used generally to refer to a corpus of written works. However, it is also more typically referred to writings recognized explicitly as works of art, such as prose, fiction, drama, and poetry. The notion has been expanded in recent years to encompass oral literature, most of which has been preserved. Literature may be used for social, psychological, spiritual, or political goals, maintaining knowledge and bringing delight. As a form of art, literature may also include writings from many non-fiction forms, such as biography, journals, memoirs, essays, and in some cases, even cinema. The term "literature" covers a broad spectrum of written works, including nonfiction books, articles, and other works. The proliferation of written works, which increasingly includes electronic literature, has been made possible by developments in print technology (Nair 1).

## The Portrayal of Culture and Food in Literature

Tradition, food, what we consume, how we eat it, our language, getting hitched, and music is all facets of culture that differ from place to place. The Centre for Advanced Research for Language Acquisition takes a step further. It defines culture as a set of socially taught cognitive conceptions, shared patterns of behavior and interaction, and knowledge. As a result, culture can be defined as the concept of a group identity supported by particular social conventions (Pappas and McKelvie). Many diverse cultures exist in the world, each of which embraces a variety of attitudes and beliefs. In addition to expressing their viewpoint, authors frequently introduce their readers to various cultures. Authors should correct the representation of cultures, which differ widely. Innumerable distinct literary genres demonstrate cultural values, and literature can provide insight into what a community considers acceptable or customary. How a writer describes

cultural values or what a culture thinks is significant to all its members depends on factors like race, gender, origin or place, heritage, and many other factors. The idea that culture embodies how people interact with one another, how they treat one another, and how they grow or respond to environmental changes is widely acknowledged. Yule defines it as a social knowledge that a group of people in the same society shares the same ideas, beliefs, and even manner of life unconsciously acquired. The term "culture" represents all the presumptions and beliefs we grab as we engage in social groupings relating to the nature of things and people. It can be expressed as "Socially acquired knowledge." Like acquiring our first language, we initially retrieve this knowledge unconsciously. (271).

Eating is an essential human intervention tied to social activities and is vital for continued survival. Eating habits and rituals, preferences, and the motives behind these actions are crucial to interpreting human culture. Due to the fundamental role that food and eating patterns play in human culture and life, underlying symbolism is considered. In literature, eating appeals not only to our taste sensations but also to our soul and thought.

### **Awakening of Cultural Understanding and Food Provider**

Cultural consciousness can be defined as developing cultural awareness, leading to an expanded understanding of culture and more profound cultural knowledge about other people and contexts. In this process, culture is defined as the shared attitudes, values, beliefs, behavioral standards, goals, and practices that characterize an institution, organization, or group. Cultural consciousness is being more aware of one's own culture. People are poignantly aware that culture and Myth permeate their hearts and souls. People perceive culture as their group's identity. A myth is a false belief deeply entwined among people and considered one among cultures that people follow blindly. Literary books are a tool for transcending information from bygone eras and reflecting society's mirror. Works of literature illustrate the culture of specific groups. This paper aims to examine cultural consciousness, the importance of food providers, and how these ruined the lives of certain characters in T.S. Pillai's novel *Chemmeen*, which earned the Kendra Sahithya

Akademi Award. He was a remarkable literary figure in Malayalam literature and a Jnanpith Award recipient. *Chemmeen* pertains to Karuthamma's relationship with Pareekutty. The novel demonstrates a romantic drama and reveals the culture of the fishermen's communities along with the southern Indian state of Kerala's coast. It also confronts the chastity myth. If a married fisherwoman commits adultery while her husband is at sea, Kadalamma will devour him. T.S. Pillai is known to have written this novel to preserve this Myth. "Virtue is the most important thing, my daughter. The Purity of body and mind! A fisherman's wealth is his fisherwoman's virtue" (Pillai 9).

Chakki observes and explains the culture of their society to her daughter. She was keenly aware of the importance of fisherwomen's virtue, which would ensure her husband's safety at sea. The sea belongs to every human being, but the fishermen's society believes it only belongs to them. If the sea is arrogant with waves, they presume the sea mother is angry and fails to comprehend the scientific reason for all this. When Chakki realizes Pareekutty and Karuthamma's affair, she yells, "They are not sea children" (Pillai 9). This clearly shows that Chakki knows that she must not marry her daughter to someone out of her religious background. The fishermen's community considers everything related to the sea. It is deemed insulting to Kadalamma if a man sexually stares at a fisherwoman. Even when Chembankunju owned a boat and nets again, they illustrated that the sea mother had blessed them rather than his work to hold them. These people assumed that Kadalamma was the wellspring of their joys and sorrows. There is also a practice among them that if a girl hits the age of ten, she must marry, or the entire family will be barred from remaining on the coast. If there is a woman of marriageable age at home, her father should not engage in activities such as trying to purchase boats.

Many fisherfolk subgroups include Aryan, Valakkaran, Mukkavan, Marakkan, and a fifth caste. The shore master would only allow the Valakkaran to own boats and nets; however, this is sometimes left in the hands of the shore master. Chembankunju, as a Mukkavan, owned his boat and nets and failed to notify the shore master. Other people on the beach saw it as a conundrum because he

went against their culture and was the father of a young girl about to marry. Even though everyone was aware, the shore master did not consider it a significant issue. Before acquiring a boat and nets, one must also make specific offerings to the shore master. He should be given "seven shags of tobacco and fifteen rupees" (Pillai 32). A small ritual must also be followed when new boats are initiated into the sea. People gathered around Chembankunju's boat as it was launched into the sea, and they made an encouraging cry for a good start. People suffered a lot without food after a few days because of their poor catch and only believed in the chakara season. A chakara is a marine phenomenon that occurs when a large population of fish and prawns gather during a specific season. This occurrence is only seen in Kerala's coastal waters and South America. This phenomenon is represented in this novel. This season is celebrated as a festival in their culture because they catch many fish.

The love between Pareekutty and karuthamma was ruined due to the culture's consciousness among people on that shore. Karuthamma was not permitted to marry Pareekutty, a Muslim as a fisherwoman. Chembankunju acquired the boat and nets with the assistance of Pareekutty, and he failed to return them. Karuthamma was conscious that the money had been given by Pareekutty solely for her benefit and could return it to him. According to Chakki's advice as a mother of a young fisherwoman, Karuthamma changed her mind about getting married to a person in their fishing community and asked Chakki to pay Pareekutty's debts before her marriage. Cultural factors influenced her decision to marry Palani. It was customary to present the shore master with betel nuts and leaves after the wedding was finalized. Chembankunju and Palani went to both shore masters on Palani's shore and Karuthamma's shore to offer this. Another old-fashioned ritual was also ascertained. Once the wedding date has been set, the neighborhood women must educate the bride on life and responsibilities after marriage. Karuthamma got the same treatment.

Pareekutty was still in love with her despite the planned wedding. When they met one day, karuthamma advised him to marry a good woman and be successful as a trader. In their culture, the wedding ceremony held

personal significance. The Shore master should be invited on the wedding day, and the rituals should only occur after he arrives. He oversaw determining the bride's price. On the wedding day of Palani and karuthamma, the same rituals were conducted. The Shore master arrived early, and there were no women among Palani's entourage. This was not their culture, and many women began to question it. They commented that trying to send a woman to her husband's house without any other woman with her is something new.

The amount of bribe money was set by the shore master. The sum was fixed at seventy-five rupees, which surprised the groom's crowd. There was an argument that this money was later paid following their ritual. The shore master took his share, and the remaining was given to Chembankunju. Chakki fainted during the muhurtham, which was viewed as a bad omen. A few women went out without eating since they did not know Palani's caste as he was an orphan. After her marriage, karuthamma left her family, leaving behind a sick mother. Karuthamma began her life with Palani. She was happy with him, but the image and memories of Pareekutty kept flashing through her mind. Chakki died after a few days, which was not communicated to Karuthamma. Before her death, she asked Pareekutty to look after Panchami and karuthamma. He was able to inform Karuthamma of her mother's death. So, he decided to meet her and tell her of Chakki's death. Pareekutty used Chakki's death as an excuse to meet Karuthamma. He travelled to Trikunnappuzha, where karuthamma resides. Many people on that shore saw him and questioned why a Muslim had come to inform them of Chakki's death when no fisherfolk men had arrived. Pareekutty revealed a sad incident; people are very concerned about their religion, even in the contemporary age. He finally met Karuthamma and informed her about her mother's death, and her heart broke as she heard the news. Karuthamma enjoys a happy life with Palani and her new baby as time passes. The Myth among the fishermen's community is significant in this novel. The myth is that the waves will rise and climb up on the shore if a woman goes astray, and sea monsters will chase the boats. This legend is based on one of the old sea shanties. Another myth holds that if a woman does not remain true on the shore

while her husband is in the sea, kadamma will consume her husband. When Palani went fishing, Pareekutty ran into Karuthamma again and fell in love with her. This caused kadamma to destroy Palani's life. Pareekutty and Karuthamma ruined their lives as well.

Among the fisherfolk, the food provider is understood as the Mother Sea. The Mother is associated with compassion, mercy, forgiveness, love, understanding, fertility, rejuvenation, birth, and the mysteries of nature. Kadamma is a mother with both positive and negative qualities. On one side, she is represented as the Bountiful Giver, a mother who looks after her children by offering good catches if they remain good and faithful. On the other, she is depicted as a destroyer who destroys the husbands of immoral wives. In literature, sea waves represent nature's wild, passionate, and creative force; they can also constitute nature's power over man or vengeance. For example, in the novel *Chemmeen*, when Palani's wife becomes unchaste, Kadamma uses sea waves to take his life. "The waves rose high as a mountain. Palani had never seen such waves. Those waves were not moving in lines" (Pillai 210). *Chemmeen* takes place at sea as well. The sea is illustrated as a goddess named Kadamma, who is held responsible for the lives of fishermen. Kadamma is the Bountiful Giver, a generous mother who meticulously cares for her wandering children. She provides them with a good catch if they stay true and good.

Food providers symbolize colours such as Blue, red, and Black. In literature, blue is commonly associated with truth, religious feeling, spiritual purity, and security. The colour blue represents the safety of *Chemmeen*. When the sea was blue, the fishermen's lives were safe in the hands of the mother sea. The colour red is associated with love, sacrifice, hatred, evil, violence, intense passion, sin, blood, danger, and chaos in literature. The red colour of the sea symbolizes blood from the sea goddess in *Chemmeen*, and it denotes a threat to the fishermen, so they do not go to the sea. "Then one day the colour of the sea changed. The water looked red. The fishermen believed it was the time the sea goddess had her periods.....they did not go out fishing" (Pillai 59). The black colour usually represents disorder, mystery, the unknown, death, primal wisdom, the

unconscious, evil, and melancholy (Sridhar). In *Chemmeen*, it represents Kadamma's rage. Chakki describes it as follows,

"Do you know why the sea goes dark sometimes? That is when the anger of the sea goddess roused. Then she would destroy everything. But if she is pleased, she will give you everything, my child." (Pillai 8)

When Palani, Karuthamma's husband, goes to sea and his wife becomes an infidel, the sea's wrath as the lousy sign of black is depicted as follows.

"From the west, a giant wave that covered the horizon came rolling. He felt a great desire to cut through the heart of that wave and go across. But the wave.....Calm. But the sea was tinged with black" (Pillai 203)

### Conclusion

Pillai's *Chemmeen* incorporates the rich tradition and customs of the South Indian seafront, primarily Kerala. The plot reflects the awakening of cultural understanding and the role of the food provider. The cultural beliefs and faith prevalent among these fisherfolk significantly impact this novel. The concept of cultural awakening also paved the way for its vast readership and critical acclaim. It has thus been adapted as a film.

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