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Abstract

The research article focuses on Cultural Relevance and Eco-Centricity as projected in the novel *Chemmeen*. It further attempts to depict the intricate relationship between humans and nature. The narrative of the novel transcends the cultural and ecological boundaries of humans and the environment. The study attempts to draw attention to the characterization of nature along with the superstitious belief associated with the fishermen community living in the coastal area of southern Kerala. It reveals the consequences of human actions towards the environment by acknowledging the discourse of their culture and ethnicity. The eco-centric perspective helps to identify the profound impact that the human race has on nature. The eco-critical theory contextualizes the struggles and aspirations of the fishermen's community with that of nature in the sea.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, culture, superstitious belief, and ecological boundaries

Introduction

The novel *Chemmeen* written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, shows the relationship between humans and nature. This relationship plays a central and vital part in the narrative. The novel vividly portrays the intricate and complex relationship between the fishing community of Chembankunnu and the natural surroundings. The fishing community of Chembankunnu is heavily dependent on the ocean for their food. The livelihood of the characters is intricately tied to the cornucopia and well-being of the marine life. The novel showcases the cyclical nature of life in the fishing village, where the diurnal routines of the characters are governed by the runs and the fish in the ocean. Respect for Nature While the characters rely on the ocean for their livelihood, there is also a deep respect for nature apparent in their way of life. The fishers understand the need to save the delicate ecological balance of the ocean. This respect is portrayed through their customs, superstitions, and rituals, which are all aimed at assuaging the ocean gods and icing a bountiful catch.

Ecological Boundaries in Chemmeen

Ecology and the boundaries of the sea are exploited by humans. This includes the decline of fish and other marine resources. Similarly, the environmental hazards reflect the human relationship, and cultural traditions. As the novel is set in the southern coastal area of Kerala, it exhibits the lifestyle of fishermen living around the region. Their boundaries are highly restricted to the coastal area and they do not go beyond leading a city life. Their lives are intertwined with the sea and the superstitious belief around them, which includes the myth that if a married woman is adulterous while her husband is away fishing at the sea, then the

kadalamma (The Sea Goddess) will consume him as a punishment for her mistake. This is one of the widely believed superstitious beliefs of the coastal community. Also, if the weather is worse in condition, it again shows the anger of the sea Goddess toward the community. The sea also represents the amount of freedom that the men have and the amount of confinement that the women undergo in that community.

Sea as a symbol

The Sea can be considered a symbol of profusion and wealth. This abundance is exploited by greedy mankind which results in the loss of aquatic livelihood. As a gift of nature, the sea seems to be resourcing with fish and other bountiful catches. The sea can be seen as a symbol of love, life, danger, treasure, temptation, freedom, and boundaries. It also reflects the ancestral roots and the cultural aspects and customs associated with which govern the lives of the fishermen. The sea also symbolizes the unity and diversity of humans and their experiences. There are a lot of stories that serve as a backdrop for the victories and mysteries of human life. The novel illustrates the temptation and the forbidden love of humans around nature. The love affair of Karuthamma and Pareekutty is also considered forbidden due to societal inclinations and superstitious beliefs. The sea can also reflect the cyclic journey of life as the idea goes like “life goes on, no matter what happens”.

The sea can also be seen as a bridge and a barrier, this shows the relationship of humans as well. The bridge that the fishermen's community has serves as a bridge and a barrier at the same time. This leads to unsettled love, a wish for power, and so on. Though Karuthamma and Pareekutty are in love, they are highly restricted by the social and cultural norms of the community. For them, their love stands as a bridge and a barrier just like the sea. “The haul he had in his boat had

grown in the sea. No one had sown any seeds for it or nurtured it. A portion of it was due of the poor people who had come to take the caste-off fish. That was the law of the sea.” (42)

Eco-Criticism in *Chemmeen*

In the novel *Chemmeen*, the ocean is depicted as a symbol of freedom and escape. For the fishers and characters like Karuthamma, the ocean represents a way to break away from the constraints of their traditional societal roles and prospects. It offers them a chance to escape the limitations imposed by estate and social morals. For Karuthamma, it provides a way to escape her sad love story with Pareekutty and her tough life in the village. The ocean is also a symbol of the changeable and dangerous aspects of life. It can be a source of livelihood as well as a grave danger. The characters' lives are closely connected to the ocean, and they must navigate its capricious nature to survive. The sea, with its storms and tempestuous moods, reflects the turbulent feelings and challenges faced by the characters in the story. The littoral terrain also provides food for the fishers and their families. It's the source of their livelihood, as they depend on fishing for their daily needs and well-being.

The abundance or scarcity of fish in the ocean reflects the cyclical nature of life, and the characters' fortunes are directly tied to the whims of nature. Nature, in the form of the sea and the littoral terrain, carries moral and artistic significance. The characters, particularly the older generation, view their relationship with nature as governed by tradition and ethics. Violating these moral canons can have dire consequences, as seen in the tragic events of the story. The purity of the terrain is connected to the moral purity of the characters, and their conduct is frequently viewed through the lens of environmental ethics. In the novel *Chemmeen*, the sea and nature are inflamed with multiple and complex symbols. There is a perpetual struggle to elucidate personal and cultural identity.

Women and Nature

Karuthamma is a key figure in the story. She is the daughter of Chembankunju, a respected and successful fisherman in the coastal village. Karuthamma is known for her beauty and

charismatic presence, which draws the attention of many men in the village. Her character represents the intricate interplay of love, desire, societal norms, and personal aspirations. Karuthamma falls in love with Pareekutty, a Muslim fisherman, which goes against the strict caste and communal boundaries of the community. Her love for Pareekutty is intense and forbidden, and it sets the stage for much of the conflict and tragedy in the novel. Her character symbolizes the idea of forbidden love and the societal constraints that can be imposed on individuals in traditional communities.

Then one day the color of the sea changed. The water looked red. The fishermen believed it was the time the sea goddess had her periods. For some days after that,

there would be no fish in the sea. After two or three days of idleness, Chembankunju could not keep quiet. He called his men to the boat and discussed the matter. None of them would give him an answer there and then. It was very rarely that the fishermen of that coast had gone to sea at such times. When the goddess of the sea had her periods, they didn't go out fishing." (*Chemmeen* 47)

Throughout the novel, women are portrayed as being deeply connected to the natural world, especially the ocean. This connection has multiple layers of symbolism and significance. In the littoral village of *Chemmeen*, women are frequently depicted as caretakers of their natural surroundings. They engage in tasks like collecting seaweed and shells from the shore, which reflects their harmonious relationship with nature. These tasks are not only for profitable food but also a way to demonstrate their affinity with the sea.

Women in the story exhibit adaptability and resilience in the face of the ever-changing ocean. They support their families by managing the household and dealing with the uncertainties brought about by the men's fishing expeditions. This reflects their ability to adapt to the changeable nature of life, much like the ocean itself. Women, particularly Karuthamma, are often associated with the ocean's moods and rhythms. Karuthamma, who is deeply in love with Pareekutty, is compared to the ocean in her emotions. Just as the ocean can be calm and gentle at times and stormy and turbulent at others, Karuthamma's feelings change between love and despair.

The women in *Chemmeen* are also portrayed as victims of rigid social morals and traditional values. They are expected to adhere to estate and class distinctions and are not allowed to transgress these boundaries, much like the boundaries set by the ocean itself. Karuthamma's forbidden love for Pareekutty and the tragic consequences of her transgression highlight the suffocating nature of these societal restrictions. Women, especially Karuthamma and Pareekutty's wife, are depicted as having their own desires and goals. They long for independence and agency in a society that restricts their choices and freedoms. Karuthamma's journey, marked by her love for Pareekutty, represents her desire to break free from the constraints placed upon her and assert her own agency.

Despite the challenges they face, the women in "Chemmeen" are also agents of change. They are not helpless victims but active participants in the evolving narrative. Their behavior and actions impact the course of events and shape the story's outcome. The relationship between women and nature in *Chemmeen* is complex and multi-dimensional. Women are not simply passive observers of the natural world but are actively engaged with it, mirroring the ways in which they navigate their lives in a traditional and patriarchal society.

Sea – a witness of unrequited love

Throughout the story, the sea is portrayed as a silent witness to the unfolding drama of Karuthamma's life. It watches over her secret meetings, emotional struggles, and the tragic

consequences of her forbidden love, emphasizing its role as a backdrop to her personal story. Karuthamma's love for Pareekutty, a Muslim fisherman, is the central focus of the story. This love is forbidden due to the strict caste and communal boundaries of the coastal village. The sea serves as a backdrop to their secret meetings and love, accentuating the sense of risk and forbidden desire.

Karuthamma's character is deeply linked with the sea, and the novel uses this connection to explore themes of love, desire, societal constraints, and the consequences of defying tradition. The sea is a powerful and evocative symbol that adds layers of meaning to her character and the overall narrative of *Chemmeen*. For Karuthamma, the sea also represents a pathway to escape from the constraints of her traditional life and societal norms. She sees it as a way to break free from the caste and communal boundaries that keep her apart from Pareekutty, offering her a sense of freedom and independence.

Karuthamma's emotional state is often compared to the mood of the sea. Just as the sea can be calm and serene at one moment and turbulent and stormy at another, Karuthamma's emotions fluctuate between the depths of love and the turmoil of societal constraints. The sea serves as a metaphor for her emotional journey. The sea plays a symbolic role in the tragic turn of events in Karuthamma's life. Her love for Pareekutty leads to a chain of events that results in devastating consequences for the characters. The sea, with its unpredictable nature, mirrors the unpredictability of life and the consequences of human actions.

The villagers consider whistling near the sea to be inauspicious as it is believed to bring bad luck to the fishermen. They view it as a sign of disrespect towards the sea and the spirits associated with it. The characters in the story perform rituals and make offerings to sea deities to seek protection and blessings before embarking on fishing expeditions. They believe that these offerings will appease the spirits of the sea and ensure a safe and fruitful journey. Certain words and actions are considered taboo in the village, especially when near the sea. The characters avoid uttering specific phrases or words that are believed to bring ill fortune. This reflects the superstitious nature of the community. The villagers often look to nature for signs and omens that can guide their decisions. They believe that the behavior of birds, the color of the sky, and other natural phenomena can provide insights into the outcome of their fishing trips. The characters believe that the sea can hold grudges, and they fear the possibility of incurring its wrath. They view violating the traditions and taboos associated with the sea as inviting curses and misfortune upon themselves and their families. These superstitions extend to the catch itself, as certain types of fish or creatures from the sea are believed to be inauspicious and are not brought into the home.

Key Findings

The novel portrays the sea as both a provider and a threat. It can be bountiful and nurturing, but it can also be destructive and unpredictable. This duality of nature is a recurring theme in eco-centric literature, highlighting the need for balance and respect in human-nature interactions. The characters in *Chemmeen* experience both conflict and harmony with nature. Their daily lives are a struggle for survival against the sea's challenges, yet they find moments of solace and connection with the natural world, underscoring the complex relationship between humans and their environment.

Conclusion

Despite all the problems, the novel *Chemmeen* is an evident picture of inconsistencies and contradictions in the southern coastal part of Kerala. It also projects the everyday routine of fishermen and the prayers of women at home. By applying Eco-centric theory, it is further identified that the relationship between women and the sea is inquisitive yet peaceful. *Chemmeen* is a novel of life and beyond. It elucidates concern for nature, women, love,

ambition, culture, etc., the novel is a never-ending music to all the lovers of the fishermen community.

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