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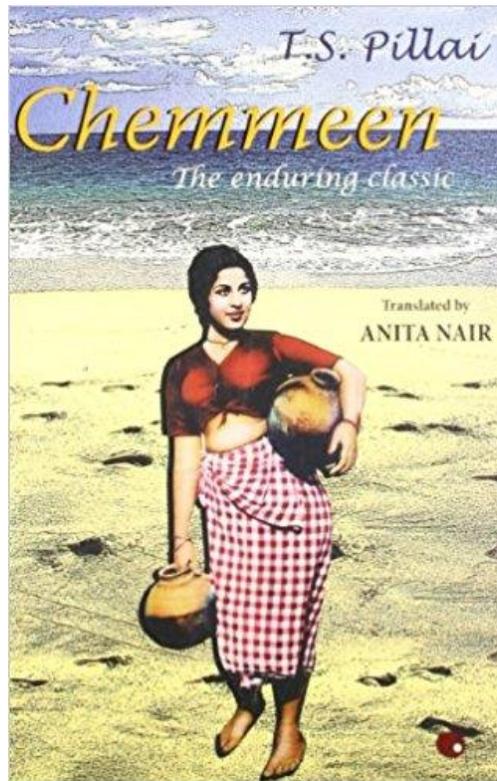
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Transgressing the Traditional Beliefs and Customs in  
Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*

S. Arunkumar, M.A., M.Phil., SET

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Chemmeen-Translated-Nair-Anita-Pillai/dp/9350290863>

**Abstract**

This paper explores the decline of traditional beliefs and customs. *Chemmeen* is a story of a fisher woman Karuthamma, the protagonist of the novel, who lives in the coastal region of Kerala. She trespasses against the laws of her society by falling in love with a Muslim wholesale trader Pareekutty. And then, she faces the scorn and hate of the villagers including her father. The same is true for Pareekutty. Chemban Kunju, father of Karuthamma, disregards not only the traditional practices and moral conduct turns greedy. Finally, he loses his sanity. In this novel, Pillai projects that if married fisherwoman was infidel when her husband was at the sea then it is

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said that the Goddess of sea (Kadamma) would engulf him. The men at sea must be courageous and honorable. The women on seashore must be uncontaminated and uncorrupted to assure the protection of their men on Kadamma's dangerous waters. The novel emphasizes the fact that peace and harmony is maintained as long the traditions and customs are adhered to. There's chaos and disharmony when traditional laws and customs are breached and overstepped the traditions of fishery folk.

**Keywords:** Fishery folk, traditionalism, customs, scorn, Chaos, chaste

## Introduction

*Chemmeen*, a Malayalam novel by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, was translated into English by Anita Nair. It is a story of passionate love that set in the backdrop of the coastal area of Kerala. '*Chemmeen*' is the tale of young fisher woman, Karuthamma, the daughter of Hindu fisherman Chembankunju, falls in love with Pareekutty, the son of a Muslim whole sale fish trader. Due to their religious and social differences and rules of the Sea, Kadamma, their love is nipped in the bud and Karuthamma marries Palani, an orphan fisherman.

## Discussion

This paper explores how *Chemmeen* advocates traditionalism. Not just Karuthamma and Pareekutty who defies traditional beliefs, social taboo and customs. Chembankunju, Karuthamma's father, who defies the rules, lay out by his community to own a boat and net, and he saves up money, which is against the custom of the fishermen, who don't believe in hoarding money. Finally, he ends up alone and ruined. His wife, Chakku who supports him resently, ends up dead. *Chemmeen* 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 infidel, the mother Sea (Kadamma) will take his life. The men at Sea should be courageous and honorable. The women on Sea shore must be uncontaminated and uncorrupted to assure the protection of their men on Kadamma's dangerous waters.

## A Clash Between Traditionalism and Modernism

The novel *Chemmeen* is a clash between traditionalism and modernism. The novelist recommends conventional norms and advocating traditionalism. The characters in the novel are all transgressing the traditional beliefs and customs. It depicts Chembankunju's life and his fall. He neglects moral conduct and his life turns greedy. He wants to buy a boat and net despite the fact that as per the customs; is not to own boat and net. Bribing his way through the customs, he finally owns a boat leading to a devastating end where he loses his sanity. Karuthamma trespasses against laws of her social taboo and traditions by falling in love with a Muslim Whole sale trader, Pareekutty. At last, she confronts the scorn and her hate of the villagers including her father.

As Narayana Menon comments, Thakazhi tempers realism with a new romanticism. "This novel has a quality of table in which the lives, the superstitions, the inner beliefs, the traditions and the sufferings of the community of fishermen are portrayed way of life a deep and significant moral".

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Both are playmates since their childhood. They love each other and express romantic love. Since Karuthamma belongs to the fishing community and she cannot be married to any outside her caste. So, she sacrifices her love for Pareekutty and she married a poor orphan fisherman Palani due to Chembankunju desire. In the novel, he has given several examples in terms of giving description of traditional beliefs and customs portrayed by characters that transgress them; and draws a contrast between what should be done and what should not be done. Karuthamma, and her father are significant characters in the novel as symbol of transgressor of social taboo, tradition and customs.

### **Vindicates the Tragic Characters**

*Chemmeen* vindicates the tragic characters who have transgressed. Karuthamma tries to resist temptation and love, loses her husband Palani who is at the sea, at the same moment as she conjoins with her lover, the fact that novelist has not portrayed characters, who challenge the customs as victors but instead gave them only loss and tragedy. The novelist is advocating traditionalism by showing the consequences.

They trust strongly that prosperity of shore heavily relies on the values of women. Chakki, mother of Karuthamma and Nallapennu, her relative often tells her the story of fallen women whose deeds wreaked havoc for the shore. Her heart yearns for Pareekutty but her concerns for the sea shore, abstain her from any drop from her virtuous pedestal. She often reminds herself of the story of fallen women. The whole plot revolves around his chastity perception and myth moves the story. Every now and then reference to the fisher women's purity come into question and even women does not questions his myth, on the other hand, often women are held responsible for any chaos and mayhem on the shore. In order to safe guard her shore, she gives consent to marry Palani. The love story of Pareekutty and Karuthamma heard by her husband Palani and his people and time and again Palani is taunted and derided for that. They remind him that him that he has married a fallen woman and they impose a kind of ostracism on him by avoiding him in their fish catching travels. Palani makes a boat of Plank and goes alone to the Sea. Each time he returns safe, he convinces himself that Karuthamma is not fallen. By this time Pareekutty comes to meet Karuthamma and their passion is rekindled. She forgets for a moment the vows of chastity she had given to her husband. Palani had gone to the sea and he is seen caught in current of water as if the timely punishment for Karuthamma is transgression.

### **Conclusion**

The novel *Chemmeen* has a tragic end of the sad tale of the protagonists. All characters trust in destiny and they struggle against odds. Tradition and taboos are very powerful for them. The novel is a complete understanding of the disintegration of tradition, social and religious beliefs in fisher folk.

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