

Female Subjugation In The Novel Chemmene

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ABSTRACT

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Chemmene is a profound description of life in a traditional Kerala fishing hamlet, focusing on the interplay of caste, gender, and economic oppression. The novel, set against the backdrop of mid-20th century Indian patriarchy, investigates the constrained roles placed on women, as exemplified by the protagonist Karuthamma's sad struggle between personal aspirations and social expectations. The story digs into the psychological effects of enslavement, emphasizing how cultural standards perpetuate women's oppression over generations. Through complex characters such as Karuthamma and Chakki, the novel criticizes patriarchal attitudes and the societal systems that support them. Finally, Chemmene is a fascinating reflection on the importance of gender equality and societal reform, challenging readers to reevaluate long-held practices.

Introduction:

Chemmene, written by the great Malayalam author Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, is a significant work in Indian literature that depicts life in a traditional fishing hamlet in Kerala in detail and realistically. The novel, published in 1947, is not only a social reflection on the caste and economic institutions of the time, but also a moving examination of gender dynamics, notably women's oppression. This theme is tightly intertwined into the story, reflecting broader societal attitudes about women in mid-20th century India.

The Setting and Context: The Microcosm of Patriarchy

The novel takes place in Kuttanad, a province famed for its extensive network of rivers and lush plains, as well as its rigid social hierarchies and strongly entrenched patriarchy. The village of Chemmene is a microcosm of greater Indian culture, with women's lives shaped by patriarchal norms and ideals. This environment is important since it serves as the backdrop for the characters' lives, emphasizing women's limited roles and places..

In this traditional society, women are generally confined to domestic responsibilities, with their lives shaped by expectations of being good daughters, obedient wives, and nurturing mothers. These roles are more than just expectations; they are imposed by social systems that allow little possibility for personal choice or individual identity. The cultural norms are so firmly engrained that even subordinated women frequently accept and reproduce restrictive frameworks.

The Representation of Female Characters: Trapped in the Patriarchal Web

Pillai's female characters in Chemmene are written with depth and sensitivity, each expressing a different aspect of female suffering under patriarchy. These characters are not simply clichés, but multidimensional individuals who, despite their struggles, frequently find themselves powerless against the immense forces of tradition and cultural expectations..

Karuthamma: The Tragic Heroine

The protagonist, Karuthamma, is important to the novel's examination of female subordination. Her life narrative is terrible, with ongoing struggle between her impulses and the severe societal conventions that govern her behavior. Karuthamma's love for Pareekutty, a Muslim shopkeeper, represents her desire for freedom and emotional fulfillment. However, this relationship is doomed from the beginning due to the village's strict caste and religious limits.

Karuthamma's eventual surrender to her mother's will, as well as cultural pressures to marry within her caste, underscore women's lack of agency. Despite her feelings for Pareekutty, she feels obligated to marry

Palani, a man from her own society. This marriage is not a love marriage, but rather a societal responsibility, highlighting how women's lives are dictated by the desire to maintain social position and family honor.

Karuthamma's inner turmoil is obvious throughout the narrative. She is caught between love and duty, between her desires and the demands placed on her. This battle represents the greater experience of many women who are pushed to hide their feelings and comply to cultural conventions, often at a high emotional cost. Karuthamma's narrative is not only her own, but it also reflects the lives of other women who are denied the right to choose their own destiny.

Chakki: The Enforcer of Patriarchy

Chakki, Karuthamma's mother, is a key character in the story, symbolizing the duality of being both a victim and an enforcer of patriarchal rules. Despite acknowledging the constraints and pain caused by these norms, Chakki perpetuates them, particularly in her relationships with her daughter. Her determination that Karuthamma marry within their caste, despite the girl's obvious pain, exemplifies a deep-seated dread of social exclusion and the need to preserve family honor at all costs.

Chakki's actions are motivated not by cruelty, but by a genuine conviction that following societal conventions is the best way to secure her daughter's safety and respect. This notion reflects the internalized patriarchy that many women of her generation have, in which oppressive societal systems are recognized as unchanging laws. Chakki's figure represents the sad cycle of oppression in which victims of patriarchy become its enforcers, perpetuating the system that oppresses them.

Chakki's relationship with Karuthamma represents the generational transmission of patriarchal values. While Chakki sincerely cares about her daughter's well-being, her behaviors are shaped by societal conventions that she has internalized. This interaction demonstrates the complexities of female subjection, where love and oppression are inextricably linked, and where women, even when acting with the best intentions, contribute to the perpetuation of their own subordination.

Panchami and Other Women: Silenced Voices

In addition to Karuthamma and Chakki, the novel includes several other female characters who, while less prominent, collectively illustrate the various ways in which women are oppressed in this culture. Panchami, another figure, exemplifies how caste and gender oppression are inextricably linked. Panchami, a woman from a lower caste, experiences double marginalization—first as a woman and then as a member of a lower caste.

Panchami's life is one of servitude and exploitation, with upper-caste males controlling her body and work, viewing her as nothing more than a tool for their own gain. Her voice is muted, her wishes ignored, and her basic existence reduced to her utility in a severely stratified social hierarchy. Panchami's suffering emphasizes the interconnectedness of oppression in Chemmene, where gender, caste, and class all contribute to women's subjection.

The other women in the community, while not usually mentioned in the story, have similar fates. They are constrained by the expectations of marriage, motherhood, and family service, with limited room to express themselves or pursue personal goals. Their tales, though frequently untold or only hinted at, contribute to the novel's depiction of a society in which women's lives are ruled by forces beyond their control.

Cultural and Social Norms as Instruments of Subjugation: The Weight of Tradition

The work depicts cultural and social standards as effective tools of subjugation, particularly the strict enforcement of caste borders and gender roles. In Chemmene, these rules are more than just customs; they are essential to preserving the social order. They effectively govern women's lives and maintain them in subordinate places by dictating everything from who one can marry to how one should behave.

The Caste System and Its Implications

The caste system is crucial to the novel's portrayal of subjugation, acting as a tangible and figurative barrier to the characters' freedoms. For women like Karuthamma, caste is a force that limits who they can love, marry, and socialize with. The stringent enforcement of caste boundaries is described as a technique of managing women's libido and keeping them within the constraints of socially acceptable relationships.

Karuthamma's love for Pareekutty is outlawed not because of personal hostility between them or their families, but because of strict social standards that prohibit inter-caste and inter-religious unions. The societal pressure to maintain caste purity is so strong that it overshadows personal happiness and fulfillment, driving Karuthamma into a marriage she does not want. This reflects a greater societal worry about maintaining social order at the price of individual liberties, particularly those of women.

The caste system also exacerbates the oppression of lower-caste women like Panchami, who are denied fundamental rights and dignity while also being exploited by upper-caste males who regard them as inferior. Panchami lives a life of continual subservience, with her gender and caste both contributing to her subjugation. The novel's depiction of Panchami's misery is a strong commentary on the intersectionality of oppression, in which caste and gender interact to sustain societal systems.

Marriage as a Tool of Patriarchy

Marriage, in Chemmene, is portrayed as a mechanism for upholding social standards and managing women, rather than a union of love and affection. Women are married off not for their own wishes, but to maintain family honor, social prestige, and caste purity. Marriages in the novel frequently end in additional subjugation for the women, who are expected to bow to their husbands and meet the expectations of their in-laws.

Karuthamma's marriage to Palani is an extreme illustration of how marriage is utilized to restrict women's life. Despite her strong emotional connection to Pareekutty, Karuthamma is forced into a marriage that is socially acceptable but emotionally unsatisfying. This marriage exemplifies the greater reality for many women in traditional civilizations, where their value is frequently determined by their ability to comply to social conventions rather than their personal happiness or fulfillment.

The story depicts marriage as a patriarchal arrangement that maintains male domination and female subservience. Women are supposed to forgo their personal ambitions and aspirations for the sake of their families, and their primary position is that of a wife and mother, which is limited to the home arena. This portrayal of marriage emphasizes the inherent disparities within the social framework, in which women's lives are dictated by the desire to uphold traditions rather than their own agency.

The Psychological Impact of Subjugation: The Inner Turmoil of Women

Pillai's portrayal of the psychological effects of subjection on women in Chemmene is both profound and sympathetic. The constant pressure to conform to cultural norms has a negative impact on the psychological and emotional well-being of the female characters. They are frequently shown as being in an internal battle, divided between their aspirations and the duties forced on them by society.

The Burden of Unfulfilled Desires

Karuthamma's inner struggle is a major element throughout the story. Her sincere and profound love for Pareekutty is suppressed by society's expectations of her. The psychological load of repressing her genuine emotions and complying to cultural conventions causes a terrible sense of loss and resignation. Karuthamma's internal conflict reflects the greater psychological impact that subjection has on women, who are often forced to hide their identities and wants in order to fit into the roles that society has assigned them. The work depicts Karuthamma's inner misery with amazing sensitivity, emphasizing the agony of living a life that is not her choice. Her marriage to Palani, while socially sanctioned, is emotionally hollow, and her heart is still with Pareekutty. This unfulfilled love, as well as the sacrifices she is forced to make, have a negative impact on her mental health, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Karuthamma's narrative is representative of the innumerable women who are forced to suppress their goals and desires in order to adhere to society norms.

Loss of Identity and Self-Worth

The women of Chemmene are frequently described as having lost their sense of identity and self-worth as a result of the relentless oppression they experience. Their identities are defined by their responsibilities as daughters, spouses, and mothers, leaving little possibility for personal development or individuality. This loss of self-esteem is more than simply a personal tragedy; it reflects a larger cultural failure to recognize and value women as individuals with their own rights and aspirations.

Karuthamma's acceptance of her situation demonstrates her lack of self-worth. Despite her inner struggle, she accepts her duty as a wife and mother, repressing her own desires for the benefit of her children. This resignation is not a sign of weakness, but rather a result of the enormous social forces that leave her with little options. Karuthamma's loss of self-worth is a touching statement on the impact of patriarchal conventions on women's psyches, as they are forced to sacrifice their own identities to fit the roles that society has imposed on them.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, "Chemmene" depicts the terrible realities of female subordination in a patriarchal culture. The novel's detailed depiction of the problems of the female characters draws light on the systematic oppression that limits women to preset roles, limiting their autonomy and suppressing their voices. The story not only reveals the deeply embedded cultural and societal standards that perpetuate this oppression, but it also emphasizes the women's perseverance and inner power as they traverse these repressive frameworks. Finally, "Chemmene" is a striking reflection on the need for social reform and gender equality, encouraging viewers to consider the ongoing fight for women's rights and the significance of confronting the existing quo.

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