



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analyzing the Novels of T. S. Pillai and Perumal Murugan from Indian socio-political perspective

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Abstract

This article provides a succinct overview of the socio-political environment depicted in *Cheemeen* by T.S. Pillai and *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan. *Cheemeen* intricately portrays the coastal regions of Kerala, focusing on the lives of fishermen and their struggles against a backdrop of colonial legacy, caste discrimination, economic hardships, and societal hierarchies, whereas *Pyre* depicts the agrarian community and its social structure, hierarchy and sensitive subjects like love, caste, social trauma and societal violence. Through a nuanced analysis of the texts, this article examines the exploitation faced by fishermen under colonial rule, the pervasive influence of caste in shaping social relations, and the challenges of poverty and economic deprivation, as well as centers on the dehumanizing aspects represented in *Pyre*. Furthermore, it explores themes of resistance and agency among marginalized characters, highlighting their efforts to challenge entrenched power structures. By delving into the socio-political dimensions of the novels, this research illuminates the novels' enduring relevance and underscores the importance of understanding its socio-political context for a deeper appreciation of their thematic richness.

Keywords: Kerala, Socio-Political, Colonialism, Exploitation, Cast Discrimination, Economic Struggles, Poverty, Fishing and agrarian community.

Introduction

The research article delves into the intricacies of the Indian society and its richness. It focuses on the richness, diversity, and uniqueness of the same but at the same time critiques both the aspects, positive and negative, pros and cons, of the culture. It looks into two rustic/rural communities, agrarian and fishing, by questioning the discriminations face by both the different communities at various levels. By doing so, the

authors of the text try to bring social awareness in society to avoid such futile notions that ruin the beauty of Indianness.

Research Questions

- How do caste, identity, tradition, and customs influence personal lives and affect social mobility in contemporary India?
- To what extent do the narratives of *Cheemeen* and *Pyre* impact the readers to celebrate the diverse Indian culture and mold the mindset to improve the richness of the same?
- What are the repercussions of transgressing the social structure and how does it impact the personal and social lives and identities of the characters?

Literature Review

Various researches were undertaken on Indian society and its diversity, analyzing the novels of many famous Indian writers.

The novel of Pillai, *Cheemeen*, has been viewed from the perspective of colonialism and a novel of subaltern context. As it focuses on the ocean and the myths related to it, it also falls under the category of Blue Humanities. It also preserves the local folk literature of the coasts of Kerala.

Dash (2015), views this novel from the subaltern lens and suggests that the colonial practices that the British people

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imposed have ruined the Indian society and it has taken place in the psychology of the Indians that they also tried to colonize their own people. Thus, Dash has criticized the Western culture for dividing and running not only the Indian culture and society but also the Indian minds. Thomas (2005), studies the novel from the lens of globalization and gives a nuanced turn by connecting literature to economics.

Pyre by Perumal Murugan becomes a novel commenting on the class structure of Indian society but also celebrating the characters that extend themselves beyond the rigid social structure and embrace individuality and Indian diversity. Ravichandran and Naveen Kumar (2021), analyze the novel from the standpoint of Dait studies and place the character of the female protagonist at the center stage, showing her as a marker of bravery and free will. Thanesh (2020) reviews *Pyre* as a bold attempt to reprove society and criticize social violence along with the spectrum of translation studies, viewing the difficulties in the process of translation.

The research gap is that both authors have looked at in a very limited context from the concept of Trauma Studies. Both the authors weave the psychological and emotion flow and distress of the characters and the trauma caused to them due to the societal norms and aspects. Therefore, analyzing these novels from the spectrum of social trauma makes it relevant in the present time. When talking about the theoretical framework of trauma, every society has different reasons and causes of trauma. Most of the frameworks of trauma are from Western and European perspectives, but it is significant to study Indian society from a socio-political lens interconnecting social trauma. Hence, in an attempt to provide the causes of comprehensive issues of Indian society in order to develop a cure for the same.

Background

Cheemeen is a seminal work of Malayalam literature written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, famously known as T.S. Pillai. Published in 1956, the novel is set in the coastal regions of Kerala and offers a poignant portrayal of the lives of fishermen and their struggles against socio-political oppression. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912–1999) was a prominent Indian writer known for his contributions to Malayalam literature. Born in Thakazhi village in Kerala, Pillai authored over 40 novels and numerous short stories, earning acclaim for his realistic portrayal of social issues and human experiences. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest civilian honors, for his literary achievements.

Understanding the socio-political context in which the story of *Cheemeen* unfolds is crucial for a comprehensive interpretation of the novel. Set in the coastal regions of Kerala during the mid-20th century, the narrative is deeply intertwined with the socio-political realities of the time. *Cheemeen* delves into a rich tapestry of socio-political themes and aspects, offering a poignant reflection of life and

the imposed challenges of the fishermen/fishing community by the society in the Southern Part of India.

Perumal Murugan, a contemporary Tamil writer known for his controversial novel *One Part Woman*, sketches the social picture of the agrarian community of Tamil Nadu by critiquing the myths, taboos, rituals, customs, etc. of the society. His novels cover sensitive issues like caste, inter-communal love, social stereotypes, inequality, and various socio-political challenges in the modern rural community. From a modern/contemporary perspective, these subjects seem outdated or mismatched with the ongoing development and growth of the country or age. But by pointing out such issues, Murugan uses literature as a tool or medium to eradicate the still-existing ideologies in some parts of India by providing a very realistic and graphic presentation of the evils, mythical and superstitious practices of modern society. Most of his works show the themes of individual and social trauma caused to the characters due to the external forces and aspects of society. Looking at his novels, there can be seen a complete distinction or a very vivid division of Indian society. The first one is the Metropolitan society that has accepted the Western culture, but at the same time, they are not completely Western, and therefore, it is having its own cultural trauma and existential issues in the 'Westernized' Indian society. On the opposite, there is the rural class of the present time who are aware of the Western culture and its acceptance by various Indian parts, but they deny it and stick to their own ideologies. Both cultural counterparts have their own significance in Indian society, which follows a mixed economy and all ethnic differences. Due to this, all cultures and societies have certain loopholes and limitations that create social trauma.

Thus, both authors have highlighted certain practices of Indian society that result in leaving the characters traumatized. Both the modern Indian as well as traditional cultures cannot be ignored and consequently, the subjects of Pillai and Murugan prove relevant even in the 21st century.

Colonial Legacy and Exploitation

Cheemeen by T.S. Pillai vividly portrays the enduring impact of colonialism on the coastal communities of Kerala, particularly the fishing villages. The novel delves into the historical legacy of colonial rule, which has left a profound imprint on the socioeconomic dynamics of the region. The colonial legacy of economic exploitation is palpable throughout the narrative. Pillai depicts how the fishing communities are subjected to exploitation by wealthy traders and landowners, who wield considerable power and influence. Fishermen, like the protagonist Pareekutty, often find themselves trapped in cycles of debt bondage, forced to sell their catch at low prices dictated by the elite traders.

Under colonial rule, land ownership patterns were established that perpetuated inequality and disenfranchisement among the fishing communities. The

novel portrays how the control of land and resources remained concentrated in the hands of a privileged few, exacerbating the socioeconomic disparities between the fishermen and the elite landowners.

Colonial policies and trade practices further compounded the exploitation faced by the fishing communities. Pillai highlights how traders monopolized the market, manipulating prices and controlling access to essential goods and services. This exploitation is reflected in the struggles of characters like Pareekutty, who grapple with the whims of the traders while striving to provide for their families. Despite the pervasive exploitation, *Cheemeen* also portrays moments of resistance and subversion among the fishermen. Characters like Pareekutty and his peers exhibit resilience in the face of oppressive systems, challenging the status quo and asserting their rights. Their acts of resistance, whether through organized protests or individual acts of defiance, serve as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the marginalized communities.

Cheemeen offers a compelling portrayal of the colonial legacy of exploitation in Kerala's coastal regions, shedding light on the enduring socioeconomic disparities and the resilience of the fishing communities in the face of adversity. Through the lens of Pareekutty and his peers, readers are invited to confront the harsh realities of colonial oppression and the quest for dignity and justice.

Quite contrasting to Pillai's novel, *Pyre* does not have a direct reference to colonialism, but at a microcosmic look into the novel, the novel very exclusively talks about the exploitation done by the society on a very personal and psychological basis, which leaves the lives of the characters in agony. The protagonists, Kumaresan and Saroja, are happily married and they are totally committed to each other. But due to the social structure of caste, their love is not accepted by the society. In fact, at certain intervals, both have to face insults, rejections, abuses and ostracism. Talking about exploitation, society and social customs psychologically and emotionally exploit both the characters. The village committee decides to banish them socially by not selling them any commodities and also by out-casting the whole family from any social gathering and religious festivals. As the girl Saroja belongs to a different caste, society considers this marriage to be impure and impious. Murugan shows society as a rigid entity that imposes exploitation and societal cruelty on the characters through merciless customs and stubborn regulations. (Kumar and Ravichandran, 2021). At last, the psychological exploitation alters into physical violence. When the husband, Kumaresan, is away from the house due to some work, the village people conspire to kill Saroja. The striking part of the novel, which Murugan has attempted to centralize, is that even after so much exploitation and harassment, there is no involvement of justice. The society has been given the supreme power

to control the lives of the people. Therefore, this serves the highest level of oppression and exploitation executed by society. According to Kumar and Ravichandran:

"It is an inquisitive absurdity that even as progressive Indians would like to eradicate the caste system, they have no understanding of their lived reality or specific caste groups in their traditional landscape. Even as these communities followed and often dispossessed by the forces of modernization, still they remain captive to the ways of the past that have continued them for centuries." (Kumar and Ravichandran, 2021)

Caste Discrimination and Social Hierarchies

Cheemeen by T.S. Pillai delves into the intricate social fabric of Kerala's coastal communities, where caste-based hierarchies exert a profound influence on individuals' lives and relationships. The novel vividly portrays the pervasive nature of caste discrimination and its intersections with other forms of oppression, shaping the experiences of its characters in profound ways.

Pillai illuminates the hierarchical nature of society in *Cheemeen*, where individuals are stratified into distinct caste groups with prescribed roles and expectations. Characters like Pareekutty and Karuthamma navigate this rigid social structure, facing discrimination and marginalization based on their caste identities. Caste-based restrictions and norms govern various aspects of daily life in the fishing village depicted in the novel. Pillai portrays how individuals from lower castes are often relegated to menial tasks and denied access to opportunities for advancement. Moreover, inter-caste interactions are fraught with tension and scrutiny as characters must navigate societal expectations and prejudices.

The novel also explores the intersections of gender and caste, highlighting the unique challenges faced by women from marginalized caste backgrounds. Characters like Karuthamma confront the double burden of caste and gender discrimination as they strive to assert their agency and autonomy within a patriarchal society. Despite the oppressive nature of caste-based social hierarchies, "*Cheemeen*" portrays moments of resistance and subversion among its characters. Individuals like Pareekutty challenge caste norms and expectations, defying societal conventions in pursuit of justice and equality. These acts of resistance serve as powerful expressions of agency and resilience in the face of entrenched oppression. Through its nuanced exploration of caste discrimination and social hierarchies, *Cheemeen* sheds light on the complexities of identity and power dynamics within Kerala's coastal communities. By confronting these issues head-on, the novel invites readers to critically examine the enduring legacy of caste-based oppression and the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality.

The main conflict of interest in the novel *Pyre* is undoubtedly caste discrimination by dehumanizing the womanhood or womanhood. Throughout the novel, the couple faces various hardships due to their different castes. The female character, Saroja, has to face abuse and insults on various grounds, and her chastity is being questioned. She is compared to a prostitute and is also degraded to the level of an animal.

"He has brought a hen and kept her hidden in a basket in the hut. Who knows if she'll lay eggs and incubate them, or they'll all simply rot?" (Murugan 2013)

Here, the author has deliberately used inappropriate language to make the readers realize the perspective of society towards a woman who belongs to a different caste. This also proves that her womanhood has been challenged and it is an insult to the purity of a woman's womb. A woman in its fundamental aspect, is seen as a deity and revered the same, but Murugan juxtapositions this traditional and cultural viewpoint towards women. He raises a question: a woman belonging to another caste does not have any right to be a woman? At the same time, the quote also portrays the social stigma related to a married rural woman. A woman who is married has to bear a child at any cost. For that, he has to fit in the parameters of the family and the society. The different caste of Saroja makes her the victim of mental molestation performed by the villagers on a daily basis. When focused on caste in Indian society, it becomes the marker of identity and it defines all other fronts of one's personal, professional and social life.

Economic Struggles and Poverty

In *Cheemeen* by T.S. Pillai, the narrative delves deeply into the economic struggles and pervasive poverty faced by the fishing communities along the coastal regions of Kerala. Through vivid imagery and poignant storytelling, Pillai portrays the harsh realities of life for individuals like Pareekutty and Karuthamma, whose lives are deeply affected by economic deprivation. The novel illustrates the precarious nature of the fishing profession, where livelihoods are dependent on unpredictable factors such as weather conditions, fish availability, and market demand. Fishermen like Pareekutty often find themselves at the mercy of these fluctuating conditions, struggling to provide for their families amidst uncertainty.

Pillai highlights the cycle of debt bondage that entraps many fishermen in the novel. Characters are forced to borrow money from wealthy traders at exorbitant interest rates, leading to a perpetual state of indebtedness and servitude. This economic exploitation further exacerbates poverty and limits opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. A lack of access to essential resources and services compounds economic struggles in *Cheemeen*. Fishing communities often face challenges in accessing healthcare, education,

and other basic amenities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization across generations. The economic struggles depicted in the novel have profound effects on family dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Characters like Pareekutty and Karuthamma grapple with the pressures of providing for their loved ones amidst financial hardship, leading to tensions and conflicts within households. Survival strategies such as pooling resources, communal sharing, and mutual support become essential for coping with economic adversity. Despite the overwhelming challenges they face, characters in *Cheemeen* demonstrate resilience and determination in their quest for dignity and justice. Whether through acts of defiance, solidarity, or community organizing, individuals like Pareekutty and his peers strive to challenge the status quo and improve their circumstances.

Through its poignant portrayal of economic struggles and poverty, *Cheemeen* offers a powerful commentary on the human cost of socioeconomic inequality and the resilience of individuals in the face of adversity. By shedding light on these issues, the novel invites readers to confront the complexities of poverty and the urgent need for systemic change to address economic injustice.

The caste discrimination also leads to economic injustice, economic banishment and imposed poverty on the family of Kumaresan. Poverty in the novel *Pyre* is closely interlocked with social oppression, social exploitation and discrimination. Therefore, the issue of economic struggle and poverty is interspersed with society and social issues. The economic deprivations and poverty were caused to the characters in the novel because of the social banishment of the family and the village council's decision not to sell any goods to the family due to the unknown caste of Saroja, who is seen as impure.

"Until we know which caste the girl is from, we are going to excommunicate your family. We won't take donations for the temple from you, and you will not be welcomed at the temple during the festival. No field laborers will come to work at your place. You cannot have transactions with any of the houses in the village [...]" (Murugan 2013).

The above lines suggest that poverty was imposed on the family of Kumaresan by social rituals and external social factors. Even in times of such hardship and struggles, the protagonist of Murugan tries immensely to aspire out of this situation. Kumaresan plans to move to a city where he can start a small business of his own. This also provides the subject of social mobility and keeping oneself away from the society where he/she has been rooted. The author paints the dark side of society by depicting how the rigid socioeconomic conditions crush the dreams, happiness, love of a couple. Murugan's portrayal is in both senses: A critique of socio-political conditions in the agrarian community and a strict commentary on the rigidity and dehumanizing elements of Indian society.

Resistance and Agency

In *Cheemeen* by T.S. Pillai, the narrative not only portrays the socioeconomic challenges and caste discrimination faced by the fishing communities of Kerala but also highlights moments of resistance and agency among its characters. Through acts of defiance, solidarity, and resilience, individuals like Pareekutty and Karuthamma assert their dignity and challenge the oppressive structures that seek to constrain their lives. Throughout the novel, characters exhibit acts of defiance against various forms of oppression. Pareekutty, for instance, refuses to succumb to the exploitation of wealthy traders and landowners, asserting his rights and dignity as a fisherman despite the risks involved. *Cheemeen* depicts the power of solidarity and collective action in the face of adversity. Fishermen in the village come together to confront injustices and advocate for their rights, organizing protests and boycotts to challenge exploitative practices and demand fair treatment. Despite the constraints imposed by caste, gender, and economic deprivation, characters in the novel assert their individual agency and autonomy. Karuthamma, for example, refuses to conform to societal expectations and asserts her right to choose her own path, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations.

Cheemeen portrays the resilience of its characters in the face of overwhelming challenges. Despite facing poverty, discrimination, and exploitation, individuals like Pareekutty and Karuthamma demonstrate resilience and determination, refusing to be defined by their circumstances and striving for a better future. At its core, *Cheemeen* is a narrative about the quest for justice and equality. Characters navigate complex social hierarchies and economic disparities, seeking to challenge entrenched power structures and create a more equitable society where all individuals can live with dignity and freedom. Through its exploration of resistance and agency, *Cheemeen* offers a powerful message of hope and empowerment, inspiring readers to confront injustice and work towards a more just and equitable world. By highlighting the capacity of individuals to challenge oppression and assert their rights, the novel celebrates the resilience and resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Pyre is undoubtedly a novel of social resistance and standing for the self. It shows the characters' personal challenges and struggles against the rigid, exploitative and oppressive societal and social regulations. The inter-caste marriage is the marker of defiance against the social norms. The decision of both the characters to marry each other after knowing that they belong to different castes, cultures, and geographies becomes the hallmark of their self-assertion and resistance towards society. In comparison to the male protagonist, the female protagonist, Saroja, is portrayed as a bold character as she is determined from the beginning

to the end to hold on to her decision by not bowing in front of the social strictures. She embodies the hegemonic and resisting female qualities in an environment where women are subdued and have no free will. The title of the novel also very greatly symbolizes the subject of resistance. Pyre (fire), becomes a euphemism for the social and psychological destruction, but along with that, the fire in the characters threatens the village and its regulations by hailing freedom and free will. The tragic end of the novel also can be seen as a strong force of self-reliance, robust willpower and resisting society through love, standing for each other, individuality against collectivity.

Conclusion

In *Cheemeen* by T.S. Pillai, the narrative intricately weaves together themes of colonial legacy, caste discrimination, economic struggles, and the quest for justice, offering a poignant reflection of life in Kerala's coastal communities. Through vivid storytelling and rich character development, the novel illuminates the multifaceted nature of oppression and resilience experienced by its protagonists, Pareekutty and Karuthamma. As we delve into the socio-political landscape of *Cheemeen*, we are confronted with the harsh realities of colonial exploitation, caste-based discrimination, and economic hardship that shape the lives of its characters. Pillai's nuanced portrayal invites us to confront the complexities of power dynamics and societal norms, challenging us to reflect on our own roles in perpetuating or challenging systems of oppression.

Yet, amidst the darkness, "*Cheemeen*" also offers glimpses of hope and agency. Characters like Pareekutty and Karuthamma demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination, asserting their dignity and challenging the status quo in pursuit of justice and equality. Through acts of defiance, solidarity, and individual agency, they inspire us to confront injustice and work towards a more just and equitable society. *Cheemeen* transcends its status as a novel, serving as a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit and the capacity for resistance in the face of adversity. As we navigate the complexities of its socio-political landscape, we are reminded of the importance of empathy, solidarity, and collective action in the ongoing struggle for social justice and liberation. In the words of T.S. Pillai, *Cheemeen* beckons us to confront the depths of human experience and embrace the complexities of our shared humanity.

Comparative Outcome

Both novels very meticulously engrave the socioeconomic dimension of Indian society. In both novels, the characters are facing issues due to the social structures and their norms. At the same time, both talk about the rural/rustic community of the Southern part of India. Though occupationally, the communities are different socially on a comprehensive

level. Both can be taken as mirroring cultures. The novels, being thematically similar, also describe the cultural and ethnic issues of Indian society. Though both are written in different time-frames, both deal with almost the same issues, showing the conflicts of society on individual versus collective levels. The authors, through their writing techniques, also make it very clear to the readers that the terms like 'honor', 'identity', and 'purity', which are at the center of any social structure, become very loaded terms, but paradoxically, they are very hollow, futile and absurd at the fundamental levels. The social regulations are the root cause of trauma in the characters' lives. These social parameters for creating an ideal identity prove to be useless. There can be seen in both the texts the artistic lingual duality, duality in meaning and interpretation. The characters are victimized at the hands of society and its customs, beliefs, taboos, myths, rituals, etc.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors, Shane Desai and Bhaskar Pandya, hereby declare that there are no competing interests regarding our research article titled "Analysing the Novels of T. S. Pillai and Perumal Murugan from Indian Socio-Political Perspective."

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