

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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**GUARDIANS OF SACRED GLASS BOWL: WOMEN AND CONCEPT OF CHASTITY WITH
REFERENCE TO MALAYALAM NOVELS *CHEMMEEN, RATHI NIRVEDAM, SUGANDI ENNA
AANDAAL DEVANAYAKI AND KHASAKKINTE ITHIHAASAM***

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ABSTRACT

Chastity and Virginity have restricted their meaning on gender basis and these words have come to be used only in relation with women. This hackneyed notion has crossed all linguistic, cultural, communal and religious boundaries and is harbored by all male dominated society. No myth is there to protect the chastity of men, only female sexuality is 'sheltered' by these virginity/chastity myths, definitely a construction of androcentric culture, and often powerless women become a prey to so called protectionism. Women are trained to internalize the double standard of morality for men and women by the constant interference of media, family, society, religious organizations and other all that are driven craze by this virginity fetish.

Keywords

Chastity Myth, patriarchy, virginity fetish

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My chastity's the jewel of our house,
Bequeathed down from many ancestors.
William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*

Though the term chastity is used in relation to the sexual behavior of men and women, somehow it limited its meaning in due course to the sexual manners of women or rather became a term to chastise women. Yes, it is a jewel to be protected at any cost and the preservation of which becomes the obligation of a female, even if it is at the cost of her life. The male egotism, curious to establish their authority over women made literature and media their weapons and often they created myths on chastity to threaten women of constant vigil over the same. These myths are patriarchal in nature, designed to satisfy the male imagination and cravings. They reflect men's subliminal desires to subdue women and fear about an intruder into his

realm. Here the study focuses on four novel classics of Malayalam literature which betrays this dominant male ideology.

Chemmeen tells the story of fishermen community and a myth that is much prevalent among them, according to which the life of husband is dependent on the chastity of his woman sitting at home. Karuthamma is a fisherwoman who falls in love with Pareekutty, a rich Muslim by birth, but she is reprimanded by her mother Chakki. Chakki, like all other fisher women, is born and brought up on a shore and is the inheritor of a philosophy which has been handed down to her by generations. That was the story of Aadi Mukkuva (primal fisherman). The man had gone beyond the horizon over a single plank fighting against the violent tides and was caught in a whirl pool. But he did not become a meal to a shark or whale. Rather as by a miracle, he was saved from that vortex. And that wonder he owed

to the virtue of his wife who was praying fervently on the shore for the life of her husband. That dedication and commitment from the part of wife was imbibed by the daughters of the sea.

'Shuttama mokaale valuth.shuttam. marakkaante swatthu marakkaatheente shuttama'. (Purity is most valued, my daughter, purity. The purity of fisher woman is the great wealth of her husband.)

This is the key to the manifesto of purity given to the fisher women, a hidden variety of women abuse. "Anyone who views the novel *Chemmeen* with his naked gaze can describe it as the broken half of a wicked male gaze." KEN.

Chakki advises her daughter Karuthamma just like all other mothers on the shore. They believe firmly that the prosperity of shore heavily depends on the values of woman there. And like all other girls on the shore Karuthamma too had recognized it as her obligation to keep her body uncontaminated for the sake of the shore. Her relative Nallapennu also tells her the story of a fallen woman whose deeds wreaked havoc for the shore. Karuthamma's heart yearns for Pareekutty but her concerns for the shore, abstain her from any drop from her virtuous pedestal. She often reminds herself of the story of that fallen woman. The whole plot of the novel revolves around this chastity perception and that myth moves the story. Every now and then, reference to the fisher woman's purity come into question and even women doesn't question this myth, on the other hand, often woman is held responsible for any chaos and mayhem on the shore. In order to safeguard her shore, she gives consent to marry Palani. The love story of Pareekutty and Karuthamma is heard by her husband Palani and his people and time and again Palani is taunted and derided for that. They remind 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 a 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. Karuthamma 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's transgression. He calls out for Karuthamma, his guardian angel in whose hands lies his life.

'Karuthammaa!'

His call overpowered the roar of storm. His voice was heard above that.

Why he called Karuthamma? Isn't there something in it? The protecting goddess of a fisherman is his wife sitting at home praying for his life. He wants her to pray on knees for him like the great great grandmother of fisher folk. The primordial fisherman who was caught in whirlpool, didn't he come back? Because of the prayer of his fisher woman! Palani has got confidence that he too can be saved like that. He too has got a fisher woman. She will pray steadfastly for him. Hasn't she vowed even yesterday? (*Chemmeen*).

Palani struggles with a huge shark he has baited and looks in vain for Arundhati (guiding star of fisherman and symbol of chastity) as a giant whirlpool forms and waves become mountainous. He cries out to his wife (the fisherman's traditional guardian angel) to pray for him. "The lives of the men at sea are in the hands of the women on shore." But Karuthamma is in the arms of Pareekutti, and Palani is dragged down to the abode of Katalamma, the sea goddess. The lovers by the sea are swept out and drowned by an outraged ocean.

O.V Vijayan's *Khazakkinte Ithihaasam* has also got such a chastity myth, a saga transmitted from generations to generations to impart lessons of purity to married women. According to that legend, a girl was molested and murdered by East India Company soldiers who had come there in search of water for their camels. Her mutilated body lay orphaned under the tamarind tree there. But the battalion which continued their journey was inflicted by disasters. Black scorpions crept into their boots, venomous snakes bit the camels and White Army met with their disastrous end. The spirit of the girl found the tamarind tree as her abode. The virtuous women of Khazak made this goddess of tamarind their goddess of chastity. As the time passed, the tamarind became a gigantic one where

poisonous snake ants found their place. But strangely, these snake ants gave way to men whose wives are chaste. They never bit those men. These men never fell from the tree. The goddess on tamarind will take care of these spotless women. One day Ravuttar, husband of Chanthumma climbed the tree and next day he was found dead under the tree and he had been terrifically bitten by the deadly ants. That day onwards, Khazak people didn't need any testimony for Chanthumma's purity and her father left the place unable to bear the humiliation. No one even thought whether it was the punishment for Ravuttar's fault or Chanthumma's mistake. No one knows whether a chaste woman's husband came alive overcoming the ordeal of snake ants!

Padma Rajan's *Rathi Nirvedam* also depends on a snake to judge a woman's guilt and to mete out deserving punishment for her. Pappu and Rathi are neighbors and their intimate moment aroused sensual desires in his mind towards Rathi who is older to him. And his constant approach makes him irresistible for Rathi and their love is consummated at a place where the snakes inhabit. Rathi is bitten by the snake at the moment of consummation itself as a punishment for her transgression while Pappu is spared. While Rathi's body is taken to burial ground, Pappu is shown going to pursue higher studies. The novel implicitly adjudicate the retribution for a fallen woman, whereas men are not even considered fallen. As it was in Victorian England, double standard is set for men and women.

In TD Ramakrishnan's novel *Sugandhi Enna Aandaal Deva Nayaki*, there is a reference to *Aratthali* which is a kind of lock and key preventing women from having sexual affairs without the knowledge of their husbands. Kanthallur Rajan Mahendra Varman marries Devanayaki and acknowledges her as his eighth queen. At the end of seven days' pooja, Devanayaki has been directed to wear *Aratthali* after rituals lasting for a long time. *Aratthali* was supposed to cover the vagina at front and it was designed in such a way that every physical need was met without any difficulty except the sexual intercourse. The belt or device had a small lock which is called *Gharbha Soothram*. The

key hole of *Gharbha Soothram* is so small that it can be seen in a close inspection only. The key of the *Aratthali* is kept by Maharaja and his royal sign is engraved on the *Aratthali*. When Devanayaki complains of the difficulty for normal walk, her rival advises her that she will be accustomed to that within days and it will become a part of the body. Her rival compares that to building a wall around the castle in order to fortify it. The concept of *Aratthali* is derived from patriarchal and colonial notion that women and land are the properties of men and it is their duty to safeguard them while even women don't have any kind of right over their own bodies. This *Aratthali* jog our memory to chastity belt which were said to be used as an anti-temptation mechanism during the Crusades. When the knight left for the Holy Lands on the Crusades, his Lady would wear a chastity belt to guard her faithfulness to him. It also underlies the male dominated belief that only women are bound to keep sexual purity and vowed to have single partner while men can go for multiple partners. So the perception of chastity is limited to women.

The notions of chastity and virginity are discriminately reserved for women. The ordeal by fire or snake to prove purity of a woman is not a novel idea in Indian English Literature while it never cited an instance to prove the same for a man. There was Sita in our great literature who had to undergo fire ordeal in order to convince Rama and his countrymen of her purity. We revere Tara, Mandodari and Savitri who were embodiments of wifely qualities, the most important one being the devotion, devotion even to the extent of carrying one's husband to a concubine's house or to the extent of approving the abduction by her husband of another's wife. Chastity for women is undoubtedly defined and explained, however the institution of extramarital relationships for men is accepted. That is why Indian society still admires Kannagi like figures who will woo sufferings even for her infidel husband. She has been deified in temples and has earned praise as an epitome of wifely devotion, chastity, acclaimed and adored as the embodiment of forgiveness, while the same misdemeanor from Kannagi would have ended in her death. These stories are transmitted to strike a

chord with women so that they will not dare to flout traditions and etiquette set for them by their male counterpart.

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