

Oracle Sea; The Art of Minimizing the Other by Assimilating the Empirical Philosophy of the Shore

Alex K. O. 

Assistant Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India.

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Abstract

This paper explores how the 'sea' and the 'sea shore' bridge the gap between the self and the other by referring to specific critical ideas from the novels *Chemmeen* by T.S.Pillai and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway. The aim is to examine the true nature of the 'self' that emerges out of fishermen's communities where their knowledge completely depends on oral tradition. As these men thrive between death and sea, it might seem to be formidable and coarse to many across the globe. But in the light of the comparative study of *Chemmeen* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, this paper analyzes how the concept of 'self' from the coast helps us to eliminate the 'indomitable other'. The analysis highlights the impact of fishermen's practical wisdom in minimizing the notion of the 'other' under the rubric of the modern philosophical term 'Empirical Philosophy'. Sometimes the concept of 'the other' is formed from an extension of our fear and anxiety over our existence and position. The image of 'Giant Marlin' in *The Old Man and The Sea*, teaches about the presence of giant beasts in our life.

Keywords

Sea, Other, Coast, Philosophy, Fishermen

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The direction of life and fate of individuals among illiterate anglers across the world is built upon the mysterious material philosophy of the shore. The fragile self and determined will of men in coastal areas have been confusing the audience of fiction from across the globe since the inception of characters like Ishmael, Santiago, and Chemmbankunju. The formation of this contradictory self emerges due to the phenomenon 'Oracle Sea'. It might be a silent presence in most maritime novels, but the intensity and influence of the sea on the living characters are immense. As Santiago says in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "A man is never lost at sea, it is a long island". The wisdom a man learns from the sea is more profound and prestigious than institutionalized preaching.

Life in the coastal areas progresses in extreme conditions, and as a result, people manifest a kind of formidable straightforward attitude. This trend has forced literary and cultural spearheads to portray the men on the shore as obstinate 'macho fishermen' however, this stereotypical representation can only be eliminated by adopting a reading based on their practical life (Adriana 222).

The perceptions of coasts and the limitations and possibilities of fishermen are formed upon the nature of the sea. The serenity and sensual traits of the calm and quiet sea intoxicate the life of men on the shore with joy, whereas the killer waves of infinite power would unleash the beast of destruction. Hence, the journey of fishermen between the devil and the sea makes their life rough and tough. The world attributes these fishermen communities with certain rugged and stubborn qualities without realizing their life under the harsh circumstances of destitution and marginalization. The intensity of this stereotypical representation of 'fishermen' as the illiterate and uncivilized group has been increasing in contemporary public domains. It is in this context, I attempt to analyze the impact of their practical wisdom in minimizing the notion of the 'other' under the rubric of the modern philosophical term 'Empirical Philosophy'.

In the novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*, at one point in his fight with the Giant Marlin, Santiago proclaims that "A man is never lost at sea, and it's a long island" (Hemingway 82). The common perception of the men is that once lost in the sea, it is forever. But the powerful words of this gouty old man eliminate that thought of loss by making the ocean a 'long island'. Wherever there is a piece of land, it is always a place of unlimited possibilities. This powerful remark with the immense confidence of an older man between his fight against giant fish and the sea implies that the sea is not a medium of

eternal loss but an avenue of infinite possibilities And that is why in *Chemmeen*, Chebankunju calls her the 'keeper of all wealth'. Thakaaazhi Shivasankara Pillai deliberately makes his character addresses the sea as the source of prosperity because, in the coastal areas of southern India, poverty was a common phenomenon in those days. And the well-being of these local fishermen was completely dependent on the opulence of the oceans.

Wealth, whether in a material form or intellectual wisdom that emerges from the sea, must be dealt with much care and attention. Just like any other 'illiterate traditions', fishermen also learn their basic lessons about life, as Walter Ong observes through the idea of 'apprenticeship' or 'discipleship'. Men on the shore extract wisdom from their experiences with the sea. Because the sea is where they spend most of their lively hours of the day, and it is where they find their daily bread(Steven 143). Therefore, the birth of wisdom on the shore completely focuses and relies on the sea. The notion of 'practical wisdom' was first proposed by Aristotle in 'Nichomachean Ethics' and later modified by Gadamer as 'Phronesis'. Stanford Encyclopaedia defines it as a 'mode of insight has its rationality irreducible to any simple rule or set of rules, that can't be directly taught, and that is always oriented to the particular case at hand. The direct application of these theoretical characteristics and features of 'Phronesis' will illustrate the idea of the inception and spread of knowledge in an illiterate tradition. Thus, the knowledge of the shore can't be confined to any particular set of rules or class, or it can't be taught directly, but the relevance and depth of the knowledge intensify in its dissemination on the backdrop of the sea.

The first chapter of *Chemmeen* and *The Old Man and The Sea* elucidates how individuals are being trained in societies deprived of literacy by using practical wisdom. In traditions that rely on 'oral knowledge', memory plays a crucial role in determining the altitude of an individual's life. And that is why the boy in *The Old Man and the Sea* is often alarmed by the character of Santiago by repeating the word 'Remember'. And there the boy concedes his faith in him by saying, "I remember everything from when we first went together" (Hemingway 6). Even in *Chemmeen*, there are many instances where Karuthamma was warned by her parents in the same manner as Santiago's apprentice boy. Every man begins their 'apprenticeship' training in life at home. As the shore master in *Chemmeen* says, "You learn about love and tenderness from your home" (Pillai 119). One of the primary reasons behind the birth of the concept of the 'other' in an individual's life is the lack of these good qualities at home. The poverty of love, care, and humanitarian values at home proportionately enlarges the notion of the 'other' in a man's journey from limited surroundings to more extensive global avenues.

The miserable journey of the fishers on the coast presented in these two novels happens in curbed circumstances, but their attitude towards life is more or less universal and optimistic. Therefore, the next part will elucidate, by leading a very restricted life, how these fishermen can produce some of the most monumental philosophical ideas to minimize the distance between the other and the self. In the second part of the novel *Chemmeen*, one of the characters named Kalikunju reminds Karuthamma by saying, "Our men live in the sea where the waves rise and fall, Daughter" (Pillai 103). It is prevalent among people to define something based on specific dual images like rise and

fall, life and death, light and dark, which help to examine the different aspects of a situation or a thing at hand with great precision. It is this firm belief in the binary contrast of existence that makes fishermen's life more meaningful though they live on the verge of marginalization. Whether it is in Latin America or Asia, fishermen hold the lower strata in the hierarchical order of society for being illiterate, and men on the shore away from the luxuries of mainstream society as well. In the socio-cultural spheres of Kerala, fishermen are being categorized as '*Mukkuva*', though it is a normal term this word resonates with an implied meaning of marginalization and outcaste. That is the reason, in this context, Kalikunju as a responsible elder, helps to reinforce the real meaning of life on the shore in the mind of a newlywed girl and for her, this might seem to be a strange thought, but the custom and practices of the coast don't have anything to hide, but there is a lot more to be revealed. And that is why T.S.Pillai writes, "A strong and enduring walls made of an ancient and sacred moral code of the children of the sea. It has neither doors nor windows. It was where she lived" (Pillai 10). As I mentioned earlier, the life of fishermen might be confined to limited surroundings. Still, the sea right in front of them is an 'Oracle' of immense wisdom and infinite possibilities.

Whether it was in the middle of the giant waves or among the deceitful fellow beings, 'eyes' play a major role in the absorption of knowledge and survival of men on the coast. The eyes of Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, stand as symbols of his existence. When the boy enters the old man's room, he observes that "with his eyes closed, there was no life in his face" (Hemingway 11). With closed eyes, Santiago empties his presence in the world, but once he gets into the sea, it is with these eyes that he continues his triumph. On the one hand, when the presence and magic of eyes render life into the characters in *The Old Man and the Sea*, on the other in *Chemmeen*, it destroys the border fence of caste, creed, and religion. The mysterious power of the eyes transforms the limited egocentric attitude into a more generous world-centric consciousness. As Walt Whitman writes in the '*Song of Myself*', "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 105). The change in Karuthamma's life from being a parent's child to a more mature adult begins with an 'eye contact' with Pareekutty. Thakazhi writes, "A man looked at her bosom. And just like that, she became a woman" (Pillai 15). In these two circumstances, the concept of 'perception' plays a vital role in breaking the barriers of differences. When Santiago closes his eyes, he completely ignores a society that rejects him for being an 'old man' whereas the romance in the eyes of Karuthamma and Pareekutty merges them as one despite all the religious and caste differences. Therefore, I would argue that the power of the eyes minimizes the space between the self and others by illuminating the minds of individuals.

For many men on the land, 'death' is an external fear, but for the children of the sea, it is only an inevitable reminder to recognize and respect the other. Humans naturally tend to categorize others based on material prosperity, color, creed, religion, etc. In *Chemmeen*, Chempankunju compares himself with the Valakkaran Kandankoran and says he wants to 'enjoy' life like him. And then his wife Chakki asks, "What if I'm dead then?" This genuine suspicion over death emerges not out of fear but because life is short. In a world where the disparity between the 'haves and have-nots' ends up in conflicts and bloodshed, a simple question, as Chakki asks, would open the 'eyes' of millions. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, various dreadful experiences of the old man enable him to perceive the other as the

'harmless' universal truth. From the beginning of this novel, Santiago was considered a 'useless object' in his neighborhood, though his past was that of a champion. The boy is the only one who still believes in this old 'champ'. And this one 'believer' manages to create a strong bond with that old man. That young champ renders power to a man who is mentally paralyzed and by absorbing this energy the old man creates history by catching 'Giant Marlin'. This act should not be seen in isolation as the victory of the old man but it is a lesson he imparts to the generations to come. That is the reason Hemingway very effectively uses the character of a fourteen-year-old boy to provoke that old silent champion. And from this acquaintance, both of them learn basic lessons of friendship and love through the boy's parents sowing the seeds of the 'difference'. The bond between the old man and the boy becomes more robust when the boy disobeys his parents and follows in the old man's footsteps. In the last phase of his life, just like Karuthamma's mother Chakki, the old man reminds the boy about the beauty of pity, power, and persistence. The other in our life is more or less a reflection of our comparison with fellow beings, and as long as we are aware of our strengths and weaknesses, it only remains a 'harmless image'.

In the last phase of his life, the old champion knows that now he is 'good for nothing', so he urges the boy to follow others. Normally, we all tend to project ourselves as 'Super Heroes'; hence it becomes tough to accept others. But Hemmingway's old man feels pity for himself both in his fading talents and last expedition. This realization of his limitations never makes him an inferior coward, but it invokes an attitude of a persistent warrior. The boy says that "There are many good fishermen and some great ones but there is only you" (Hemingway 14). What makes this old man so unique? I would argue that this old man doesn't bother much about anything and his capacity to adapt to situations makes him so special to that boy. For instance, in the beginning, when they go to drink beer on the terrace, others make fun of the old man, but as a real champion, he doesn't get angry with them. And at home, he makes pillows by filling newspapers into his rolled-up trousers. This type of high adaptability skills helped him to be very much different from others.

Sometimes the concept of 'other' is formed from an extension of our fear and anxiety over our existence and position. The image of 'Giant Marlin' in *The Old Man and The Sea*, teaches a lot about the presence of giant beasts in our life. This fish with unusual traits and techniques is a metaphor for the others in our life, and the easiest way to tame such giant 'monsters' is by giving love and respect. And that is why at one point in his fight against this fish, the old man says, "I love you and respect you very much" (Hemingway 40). The love Santiago feels at this point is not just a familiar feeling, it is a type of adoration towards someone more powerful and clever than him. To conquer an equally powerful and competitive opponent by using the same strategy can be seen in the novel *Chemmeen* as well, where Chembankunju doesn't engage in a fight with Palani. Still, he proposes an idea to make that 'other' his companion by calling him the 'Prince of Sea'. When this prince loses his love and respect for his co-workers, he is filled with hate and vengeance, eventually leading him to a terrible catastrophe. But Santiago, who holds on to his calm and quiet nature, finally emerges as a victorious man. The key to Santiago's triumph in this novel is the art of asking questions.

The role of questions in oral traditions is to connect the known with the unknown.

It acts as a link between the self and others. Chembankunju and his wife create a connection with Palani through specific basic questions. And the old man, in his fight against Marlin, frames questions like "what is his plan? And what is mine?" (Hemingway 44). The power of questions will help us measure things' weaknesses and strengths. Especially in situations where the other is highly intimidating, the art of asking questions will help an individual to improve themselves so that the threat of the other can be minimized.

Finally, the blessings of an 'omnipotent protector' gained through prayer help individuals to move ahead with much courage and commitment. Santiago, though he is not religious and on the verge of defeat, begs the Lord for help and says, "God help me endure. I'll say a hundred our fathers and a hundred hail Mary" (Hemingway 67). The kind of fellowship prayers offer helps individuals significantly in alienated surroundings. Santiago benefits from this prayer in *The Old Man and The Sea*. Unfortunately, in *Chemmeen* Palani doesn't get the prayer support of his wife Karuthamma, so he gradually slips into an eternal sleep. These two women figures in these novels play a decisive role in framing the climax. For instance, mother Mary is portrayed in the bible as a chaste woman, the mother of Jesus, and therefore saying a prayer in her name will not be in vain whereas the coastal tradition in south India firmly believes that the life of a fisherman in the sea is in the hands of a woman on the land. In *Chemmeen*, Karuthamma fails to pray for her man in the sea as she engages in love with Pareekutty. This confined role of a woman is questionable in any society but in the coastal communities, a woman is attributed with certain duties being a wife as she always stays on the land. One such duty is to pray for her man who earns them the daily bread for sustenance. The concept of chastity of a woman saving her man seems strange, but in such traditional societies, everyone has their own roles to perform to support each other as well. It is in this context, I would argue that when Karuthamma fails, Pazhani fails but in Santiago's case he prays and Mary saves. I would argue that it is not about myth or belief, in a society that relies heavily upon oral traditions and maxims, the duty of an individual is very significant. When an individual performs his/her role with sincerity and persistence victory will gradually emerge but if she or he fails to do that the whole system collapses. Because these indigenous societies whether it is in Latin America or India create knowledge based on their collective living experiences and not from any literary traditions.

Conclusion

Both these novels originate from the two extreme ends of this world but the portrayal of the concepts of 'self and other' reflect stunning similarities. I would argue that in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago redeems the esteem of an old champ when his strength was questioned by a little boy along with the rejection from his own community whereas in Palani's case it was his background being an orphan and haughty in nature make him a bit different from others in the community. In each case, both Santiago and Palani are subjected to alienation from their own fellow beings but as determined individuals, they use the image of their 'sanguine self' to merge the gap with the others. Though both these fishermen stand as the epitome of individual triumph and tragedy, at the end of these two novels, Santiago and Palani philosophize an eternal truth on the

backdrop of the sea, and that is what Santiago proclaims "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (Hemingway 80). As long as an individual has faith in their 'self', the other only remains a walking shadow.

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The Author:

Alex K. O.

Assistant Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India.

Email: alexouseppachan@gmail.com