

The Hardships Encountered by the Sea-Faring Families of the Coastal Belt of South India from a Geo-Humanities Perspective; with Special Reference to Kurumpanai C.Berlin's Short Story Collections, "Kadallukulle,Kadallukulle" and "Kadalin Karuvarayil"

¹A. Philo Fragrance Serene, ²M. Senthil Kumar

¹(Reg.No: 24113270206), Full-time Scholar, Dept. of English, Vivekananda College, Agastheeswaram, Kanyakumari District-629004, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Thirunelveli, Tamil Nadu-627012, India.

Philofragrance2023@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Dept of English, Vivekananda College, Agastheeswaram, Kanyakumari District 629004, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Thirunelveli, Tamil Nadu-627012, India.

Every terrain has its own history and a unique culture of its own. In Nature's creation, we see mountains, rivers, deserts, marshy land and oceans. People live at the foot of the hills, they stay along the river banks, they traverse across the deserts and also indulge in farming and agriculture in cultivable lands. The coastal people are no exception; the population along the coast, spend their time at the sea and by the coast, for, their survival totally lies only there and nowhere else. Let us dive and delve into the struggles the sea-farers undergo, deep sea; the storms they face, mid-sea; and the mishaps they meet with, across the sea, while still sailing towards the horizon that lies farther away... all through pensive of their family members.

The stories chosen for the present study are from the anthology, "*Kadallukullei, Kadallukullei*" (Into the Deep Sea) and *Kadalin Karuvarayil* (In the Womb of the Ocean) authored by Kurumpanai C. Berlin and translated by DR. James R. Daniel and A. Philo Fragrance Serene. The life and life-style of the fisher-folk are clearly portrayed in the above-mentioned books. The socio-economic status of the coastal people, their geo-political conditions, their day-to-day encounter with the rough and turbulent seas are genuinely depicted in the collections of short stories which might appear strange to people of other domains. Tourists love to admire the sea from a distance. At times they find it irresistible to wet their feet in the low waves heading towards the shore; some of them even enjoy a bath, in the sea, amidst the soaring waves; all just for the fun of it. Yet, how many of them are aware that the sea can be devouring and prove to be dangerous?

The sea has not only taken so many innocent lives but has also twirled away lakhs of people during occasions like tsunami... ships have never reached their destination, sailors have been lost during their voyages, fisher-men have not returned after their catch, whirling winds have widowed many a wife, children have become father-less, their mothers have shouldered the family responsibilities, raised their children, all by themselves and settled them in good positions. They are happy to see their beloved children well-settled.

The sufferings of the men mid-ocean, the sorrow of the women at their homes, the struggles of the men, facing the high waves offshore, the strife of the women facing poverty onshore, the shelter that the huts provide them, the shacks where the men recline after fishing, sorting out the catch, mending their torn fish-nets, auctioning the fish, crab, prawn etc. are everyday affairs but from a geo-humanities perspective, the coastal landscape literature exhibits more emotional conflicts than in any other landscape literature.

The men set their sails and with high hopes slide into the sea, over the waves to locate where their nets lie. Once the nets are spotted, they put in all their efforts and pull it onto their canoes. Generally, the unique circumstances and geo-cultural and geo-humanism contribute to a person's personal experiences their exposure, their circumstances, their background, their family-life, and the like. The coastal people's life is especially marked by

starvation, sufferings and struggle for survival and the hard and harsh realities of emotional conflicts, longingness, belongingness, identity crisis, discrimination etc. The men at sea anticipate a good catch. They have been depicted as waiting and waiting for the waves to subside and lie low so that they could “steer through and go beyond the tide. If the rough waves soar up incessantly, what can be done?”

The women are seen with repressed emotions. They are also shown as waiting and waiting for theirs with all anticipation that their husbands would bring home a good catch. They are in tears and fears all through their life and it is very common to meet with mishaps every now and then and still common to wail and moan.

The sobbing wife in *Kannethirey* (Right Before My Eyes) comes by in tears and then she whimpers. “Just put yourselves in my husband’s shoes and do you ever think that my husband would ever bear to see you in troubled waters. The children yearned just for some *kizhangu* and *kanji*. They never wanted a grand feast.

The story of Agnes in *Jeevana Poraatam* (The struggle for Survival) is an example of the daily problems they meet with. Once she could sell all her fish, she bought two kg *kizhangu* and two kg rice from the shop and hurried home as fast as her legs could carry her. By then, it was already 10 pm, and nobody knew how her children put up with hunger until then! They had cuddled in each corner and dozed away not having anything to eat.

The women usually stay strong in the face of adversity, and prove to be an embodiment of resilience all through their lives. They don’t mind about themselves. They live for their family and the welfare of their family.

Going deep into the short story collections of Kurumpanai C Berlin, it doesn’t go un-noticed that in “*Naan Padikkannum*” from *Kadalukullei, Kadalukkulei*. “I Must Study” from “Into the Deep Sea”, Pathrose, yearned to study although he had to earn at that time. The young boy’s wish was crushed and nipped at the bud. “Only if he worked that hard, he could meet the medical expenses of his poor cancer-hit father and buy drugs for his asthmatic mother who lay in bed coughing incessantly ...and to keep her death at bay for a few more days.

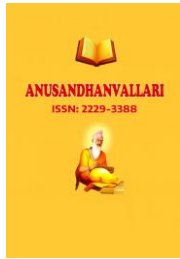
Some of the stories evoke pity and sympathy, for example, in “*Kannethire*”(Right Before My Eyes) when Marceline dies at sea, his wife cries, “When you are gone away leaving me and our children, why the hell should I live?” And her son in tears between sobs says, “*Appa... appa...you told me you would buy me my school uniform ... and now who would buy them for me appa?*”

His short story “*Kannethire*”(Right Before My Eyes) brings before us the emotional state of the men at sea. In the words of the fishermen, “The huge wave is like a cobra raising its hood, rising high and falling as loud as thunder.”

The men sigh. They are sad that they have to starve. They compare the state of affairs in their village with that of a nearby village, Vizhinjam, a few kilo metres away. They say that Vizhinjam fishermen catch large amounts of prawn just as sardines are caught at their sea near their home. They could as well catch lots of prawn as the fishermen of Vizhinjam do, if only they could venture into the sea. But how? Herein the geo politics plays a crucial role. The author brings to limelight that the government had always ignored the fisherman community, since they did not have a person among themselves to represent their requirements before the government.

Agnes was a fresher in her fish-trade in “*Jeevana Poraatam*”(Struggle for Survival) she had taken to selling fish only after her husband was no more. Obviously, she wasn’t good at bargaining with her customers. And to add fuel to fire her colleagues put her to shame, speaking sarcastically about her pitiable state. Such is the struggle of the widows in the community for they do not have anything to fall back upon. They mentioned how far she had to stoop to make a living. Education in the community had been the last option whatsoever for they had other important and basic necessities to look for before they think of education. She had been in a good family, and quite well to do too yet she had to pick up a basin and begin selling fish all because her husband had died and she had no other go. Had she been educated she needn’t have struggled.

“*Boomikku Baaramai*” (A Burden to Mother Earth) is yet another short story that gives us a clear picture of the people by the coast; how the sea gobbled up everything and even did not let go the people around; how within

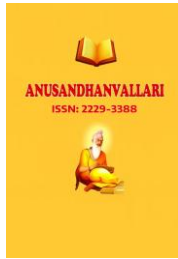


minutes the whole community was shattered and stranded. Many of them lost their houses, their family members, all their belongings, their hard-earned money their dear and near ones were all washed away within seconds. Everything became topsy-turvy, in the coastal belt. In the author's words, "*Appa* dear, look here, *amma* is being dragged away." *Appa* replies that *amma* would manage by herself and he wanted her daughter to be careful... she could understand what *appa* meant. Her mother had legs, so she would be able to look after herself but as for herself everything was difficult; she could only crawl around. During tsunami, everyone was helpless. The lame girl could see Simillan, her neighbour being washed away. The grandpa next door who used to fondly call her "my dear", was being carried away, his lungi just gone away from his loins in the splashing water. Such were the challenges when the tide rose and devoured everything. Moaning and groaning everywhere... The hardships of the tsunami prone area are well portrayed in the short stories.

The prevalent social-discrimination within the same community, has been show-cased with a blow to the so-called high society. Just because they were economically not sound enough, Michael and his widowed mother weren't invited for Sumathy's puberty feast at their neighbourhood. Still, there had been a friendly bond between Michael and Sumathy's brother. Michael couldn't bear when he came to know that they were ignored and discriminated. He was totally upset. For a boy who enjoyed *kanji* and *thuvayal* the aroma of the parathas and the meat curry were tempting also because parathas were one of his favourites. Tears well the eyes of the readers when Michael says, "No, you are not our relatives. Why do we need the food of the relatives who did not invite us?" But since they were children soon both of them had a jolly good time and their faces lit with glow. The author ends his beautiful story with a slash to the elders who try to maintain their status just by neglecting their fellow-men, with a false prestige. An example of how though the elders fail to their fellow-men, children instinctively make up in no time as they are good at patching up.

"*Ippadithan Nadakkumo*" (Would it Happen Just Thus?) is a fine slice of the society, whose dreams don't come true. To realise dreams there are other factors that should come in unison. Arularasi was focused into studying her lessons for her senior secondary exams. In order to help her mother finish the work of knitting fish-nets, she had been assigned to, by the fish net firms Arularasi indulged into knitting. And due to influence another well-to-do student who had scored lesser marks than that of hers and one who had three earning members in her family, was chosen as a beneficiary. Another truth was that one of her brothers used to hang around the presbytery and was a close associate of the parish priest. Even the Catholic diocese scheme for the poor students did not help her in any way. This shows that even if eligible, influence plays a vital role in enjoying the benefit schemes.

In another anthology, *Kadalin Karuvarayil* (In the Womb of the Ocean) in *Nombalathil Oru Kaditham* (A Letter in Agony) a young boy of just fifteen, has been sent to the sea in Kerala along with older men. The ill-treatment he undergoes there, the hardships at that age, his concern for his family members, his sacrifice for the prosperity of his family, his sense of honour and his reconciliation to his fate are brought to light." He asks his *amma* whether she doesn't remember the doctor's advice to have medicines regularly. He enquires his *thangachi*'s health because the previous time he came home, she was suffering from malaria. And the atrocity was that of Ambrose's. Well, it is true that they borrowed Rs.20,000 from him for his *appa*'s tumour surgery. And what business does he have at their house to ask them to sell their belongings and pay him promptly? How could he hurt their feelings? All of Arockiam's dreams were shattered. He wanted get his *thangachi* married off into a good family, to educate his brother, so that he would settle well. His class teacher used to tell Arockiam that he was studious and talented and that he would attain a high position in the future. But now? The incidents that are mentioned in Kurumpanai C. Berlin's short stories are those that happen in everyday-life in the lower strata of the society, typically those under-privileged residing by the coast. His brother often bunks classes and goes for movies. That bothers him. The family lays its trust upon Arockiam that he would look after them. He also compares his neighbour's house during Christmas; it would be illuminated magnificently whereas his house has not been electrified yet. These are the normal feelings of a poor boy of 15. No wonder he envies his neighbour, Edwin's terrace in full decoration.



The author has meticulously brought in excerpts of a fishing village to the notice of the readers who are not familiar about the fisher-folk.

The Kurumpanai C. Berlin, presents a clear picture of the social menace that afflicts the fisher-families. Indian Rare Earths Limited that indulges in mining is the root cause for cancer, spreading along the coast. Born as fishermen, what they know is fishing alone but enticing them with a fair amount as salary, they are roped in, to digging and carrying sand with a spade and a basket. And all of a sudden, they announce, “Until further announcement, no sand mining.” So, they don’t offer a permanent job either. On the whole, they are neither into fishing nor into mining.

Now-a-days, times are changing. The fisher-man community has improved a lot. They are well educated and are well settled. They have politicians to make a representation. They themselves are into business. Soon they will be one among the society and will not be ignored. They will hold high positions and honoured for their hard work and perseverance.

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