

Sea Life and Culture in Hemmingway's *Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Every civilization is born on the banks of rivers and oceans. From time immemorial, the water bodies predominated the formation of colonies. In eco criticism the people who live on the shores are classified as *Neythal Tinai* as found in *sangam* Tamil literature. The main occupation of people belonging to this area is fishing. Their lifestyle depends on sea. The sea becomes their preserver as well as destroyer. It is a kind of never ending reservoir of wealth. In the story, the old man Santiago fishes in the sea in vain. Everyone mocks at him and even the small boy who accompanies him everyday loses faith at one point. But Santiago was confident that one day he would catch the giant whale. The old man's faith in the sea is enormous to an extent that his own folk consider him as mad. The research paper highlights the life of people around the sea as portrayed by Hemingway in the novel *Old Man and the Sea*.

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Sea is always connected with life and it plays a major role in the lives of all living beings. The vastness of ocean provides a great source for various living beings. Besides it also produces energy that is used by the beings. They are a source of inspiration to humans. In Tamil literature sea life is classified as *tinai*. People who live near sea depend on sea for their day to day life. Their main profession is fishing. The *tinai* is termed *neithal*. Here people indulge in business related to sea products. This ranges from fishing to manufacture of salt, rearing pearl oysters, constructing boats, fishing nets, and so on. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the life of fishermen as portrayed in Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*.

Hemingway is a prominent writer of his time, considered as the "lost voice of his generation." His popular works include *A Farewell to Arms*, *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*. But his magnum opus is *The Old man and the Sea* for which he was awarded Pulitzer prize in 1953 and in the consecutive year he was awarded Nobel Prize in literature. He is well known for his powerful style and mastery over the art of narration.

The story opens with the description of old man, "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undetected" (1). The old man fished alone in the gulf stream for eighty four days without any good catch.

Although Hemingway said the old man, Santiago, was based on “nobody in particular,” he most likely used aspects of his fishing buddy Gregorio Fuentes when developing the character. Like Santiago, Fuentes was gaunt and thin, had blue eyes, came from the Canary Islands, and had a long, battle-scarred history as a fisherman. Fuentes was the captain of Hemingway’s boat and the two frequently talked about the novel. (“11 Facts About Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea”)

In the beginning for the first forty days he had a small boy as his companion. The boy due to the pressure from his parents had to leave the old man and had to work in another boat where he “... caught three good fish the first week.” but he was sad to notice that the old man had no catch. but still the boy had a great hope on the old man. here Hemingway gives a description of a sea man’s life with his gadgets like “the harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks, and, furled,...” (1) the worn out instruments of the old man shows that he has been on sea for a long time. In fishermen community they are found cordial to each other which could be found in the friendship between the old man and the young boy as he offers a beer, to which the old man reacts, “ ‘why not’, the old man said. ‘Between fishermen’” (1). which shows the friendly attitude that prevails among the fishermen community.

In the story the life of fisher men in the sea is explained in the first part, where they catch fishes like marlin, sharks, etc., butcher and carry to the market in Havana to be sold. Their business depend on the current and depths, their lines and the weather. Some of the fishermen catch shark and sell it to the shark factory. Thus their livelihood is dependent of fishery. Orville Prescott, a reviewer remarks that: “The excitement and tension of the old man's adventure, the magnificence of the great marlin and the beauty of days and nights alone on the Gulf Stream are all well conveyed in "The Old Man and the Sea" (“Books of the Times”).

The old man becomes nostalgic when he explains the boy how once they caught a big fish together, “You were nearly killed when I brought the fish in too green and he nearly tore the boat to pieces”(2) and they boy remembers the “slapping and banging” of the tail while the old man butchered the fish like cutting a tree. The old man is always confident of catching a good amount of fish, he says “Tomorrow is going to be a good day with this current” shows that their catch also depends on sea currents.

The house of the old man is made of tough bud-shields of the royal palm which are called guano. The conversation between the old man and the boy reveals their life style, food and so on. This is evident from the following lines when, “the boy offers black beans, rice, fried bananas and some stew as supper to him”(2). the old man says that anyone can catch fish in the month of May as it is easily available but it is not so in September. He becomes nostalgic about his childhood days and dreams of Africa, “golden beaches, white beaches ... he heard seas roar and saw native boats” (6). All this shows his connectivity to the sea.

Their life style is different from others as they wake up before dawn to go for fishing as “Usually when he smelled land breeze he woke up and dressed to go and wake up the boy” (6). Also the old man is not rich to afford good food hence drinks coffee as it is the only food he could afford for the whole day. He cannot expect to find some food on sea as land dwellers. The old man leaves in the early morning to the deepest part of the sea which the fisher men called “the great well” as there was a sudden depth of seven hundred fathoms. The old prefers this location as he knew that “all kinds of fish congregated because of the swirl the current made against the steep wall of the floor of the ocean” (7). Thus he risks his own life to catch fishes in the dangerous sea. Here, the author beautifully pictures the duality of ocean, why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel. She is kind and beautiful. But she can be cruel and it comes so suddenly and such birds that fly, dipping and hunting with their small and sad voices are made too delicately for the sea. (7)

Shows that the old man is kind towards the sea creatures. This is a common quality of all fishermen. They are never greedy and catch fishes only for their livelihood. They consider sea as a mother like the old man who “thought sea as *la mar* what the spanish call when they love her ... for young fishermen ... *el mar* masculine” (7) as they consider her as a contestant. But the old man always considered sea as feminine, the giver. As the moon affects women, it also affects the sea. Hence he considers the sea as a woman, a mother who cares and nurtures her children.

For nearly eighty four days the old man struggled in the sea, he spots a school of dolphins trying to catch the flying fish. As they moved away, the old man had little chance to catch them. But the sight of planktons made him happy as there would be many fishes around. The experience of the old man in the sea shows that though the sea is filled with plenty to fishes, catching them is not so easy even for an experience fisherman like him. He had landed many days empty handed. This is the reason why the boy’s parents did not allow their son to fish with him. At last, he was able to hook an enormous fish, “he had never hooked such a strong fish and without a companion he was unable to pull it out” (13). Though he is unable to pull the massive fish he is determined to drag the fish to land. he considers the fish as his brother, “I wish I could feel the fish, he thought. He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do so” (16). A kind of fraternal feeling ebbs in him as he feels both of them as children of the sea. He says, “The fish is my friend too, ... I have never seen or heard of such a fish, but I must kill him” (19). He feels guilty of killing such a huge fish but he justifies his own act saying, “ ‘I am sorry that I killed the fish though,’ he thought. But pacified himself ‘I killed him in self defense’ (29).

He considers the fish he killed as his brother and as he killed his relative, he has to do the slave work as a means of fixing his deed. He was not ready to give up and there is a tough fight between him and his catch on the unfriendly waters. Once the blood of the fish spreads, sharks devour the flesh of his catch thus the time he reaches shore, he is left only with the fin. All his effort had gone meaningless and the old man feels satisfied as he was able to catch the big white Marlin, a rare fish.

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