

**A Study of Dalit Consciousness in *Scavenger's Son*
by Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai**

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The Abstract: *Scavenger's Son* is the English translation of Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Malayalam novel *Tottiyude Makan*. It's Pillai's widely read and appreciated novel which was published in 1947 and after twenty-eight years i.e. in 1975, it was translated into English by R.E. Asher entitled as *Scavenger's Son*. This novel is the story of struggle against caste based exploitation. There are three generations which fight against social-stratification and exploitation but it is only the latter one that appears conscious and becomes successful in taking revenge for their exploitation while the first and the second generations surrender before their exploiters. The novelist himself has written that "a scavenger's son, Chudalamuttu is forced to follow his father's profession. For once he decides to change his pre-ordained destiny. . . . But will society let them [he and his wife] fulfill this ambition?" (Pillai, Backside of Cover Page). In the present research paper the mentioned novel will be evaluated in the light of revenge as motif.

Keywords: Identity, Untouchable, Dalit, Exploitation, Society, Caste, Reality etc.

The Research Paper: The novel opens with Ishukkumuttu and his young son Chudalamuttu. The father has been working as a scavenger for thirty years in the Alleppey town of Kerala. He is ill and wants to apply for two days leave but the overseer of the municipality rejects his request. Chudalamuttu is taken aback on the indifference of the overseer. Ishukkumuttu gives the overseer some money as bribe every month, yet the latter rejects his plea and menacingly warns that "he would be replaced" (Pillai 5), because he has got someone else for this job. Chudala informs his father about the intention and attitude of the overseer. "It had been his intention to hand over his scavenger's tin and shovel before he died" (5-6) to his son Chudalamuttu. He has already told to the overseer about the plan of his succession. He wants that his son must accept his traditional job of a scavenger because he comes out from that kind of generations likewise the school-teacher in *Children of God* suggests the parents of an untouchable boy, "A man needs to follow in his father's profession." (Rao 40). Ishukkumuttu wants the same thing from his son. The overseer of the municipality rejects his plea twice but Ishukkumuttu knows it very well what he wants. So he himself goes to the overseer and settles the affairs of his son's job as a sweeper in the Alleppey municipality. He says to Chudalamuttu, "It is a father's tin and shovel that I am giving. By that means my son must live" (7). And "it was that on that day a young scavenger went to work in the Chandanakkow Ward, Alleppey" (7).

Chudalamuttu goes to work on the latrines unwillingly. He becomes worried about his father, who is ill for last two days. He has been asked to bring some rice and water. But he cannot get the two things from two doors which were hopeful to Chudala. He goes to the next door and calls out, “Would you give me a little water?” (11). An old woman, who has been performing prayers, becomes angry because he is the fourth to interrupt her amidst the prayers. Chudala flees from that place speedily. On his way back there are many houses of the poor people. He collects from them enough food and water for his ill father. He has learnt two lessons from one day’s work in the locality that when the latrines are full, a scavenger can get something easily. But in the evening when they are empty, no one gives him anything to eat or drink. The second lesson he has learnt is that a scavenger who cleans the dirt is compelled to eat dirt. He further thinks that the next month will be without pay. That will go to the municipality officers as bribe for his job. By the time Chudalamuttu returns home, the night has already fallen. He calls out his father but no response comes back. Then he goes to the place where he is lying and asks, “Father, are you asleep? Look I’ve got some *kanji*” (13). Again there is no answer. Now he has discerned that his father is no more. It is very important to brood that Ishukkumuttu, the scavenger, who has swept the grounds and cleaned the latrines of Alleppey municipality, had died in a hut of the same town without water and food. At the time of his death he was thirsty as well as hungry.

Time passes itself and Chudalamuttu grows into a man. Although he is a scavenger but his clothes are always clean. He takes bath daily. Physically he is quite sturdy and well-built. He is a person who sees and understands things. He is a determined sort of man. He never bows his head before the caste Hindus unnecessarily. No one takes liberties with him. But he shows respect for the people of every household. He has learnt many things from the high caste people. But he thinks that there are many things in his life which he has to achieve. Now he has been allotted Chandanakkow ward to clean and sweep. He has learnt to earn and save money. This is the most important lesson, he has learnt from other people.

One day Chudalamuttu goes on his way to work. The overseer of the municipality, Keshava Pillai comes across to him. He becomes jealous of the sweepers and their awareness. He looks contemptuously to all of them. He fears that if there is a union, then his profit in bribe from the scavengers will go away. How will he settle his expenses? He will be troubled. Like everyone from the caste Hindu, he also doesn’t like the untouchables coming equal to him. He wants to keep them under his impression. But he knows it very well that a union’s foremost function is to bring the feelings of equality among its members and the awareness for their rights. If the sweepers become conscious of their rights, the people like Keshava Pillai will be ruined. How will they survive? The overseer becomes worried. He enquires Chudalamuttu, “What’s this about your union?” (30). But Chudala hesitates to tell something about his role in it. And the overseer says contemptuously to Chudalamuttu, “The president is making enquiries. It was a mistake to employ you. You are a scoundrel. I should have known all along. It’s my own

foolishness” (30). The sweeper tries his best to rejoin the overseer but in vain. He feels a fear that he will lose his job. In the evening Chudalamuttu goes to see Keshava Pillai at his house. He begs for mercy. But the overseer’s anger is not assuaged. He threatens Chudala that the president wants to throw him out of the job. The poor sweeper does not know what to do next. Then his mind works and he places a packet at the overseer’s feet. With great reluctance the overseer agrees to speak to the president on his behalf.

With the passage of time, Chudala meets a girl named Valli. Love between them blossoms and they get married. They begin to live in the parental house of Chudala. One day Valli requests him that the place seems to her a misfit. Chudala asks Valli, “Is it enough that we live forever as scavengers? (46). She cannot understand his argument. “He asks, “Would decent people tolerate them as neighbours?” (46). But she does not understand what he is getting at. She thinks, “Is not a scavenger a scavenger? Is it possible to become something else?” (46). He again instructs Valli, “If we do [work hard] our children will live in comfort.” . . . “Our children must not become scavengers” (46-47). Chudala consistently decides that his children will not be scavengers like himself and Valli. He plans to work hard to make them something else. But there are some unheard premonitions in the society and those should be considered by the untouchables carefully. Chudala wants her to be clear and clean but she obeys him reluctantly. The unheard danger keeps her conscious of a fear all the time. Unfortunately there breaks out an epidemic of smallpox in that area of Kerala state. The people are dying one after the other. Valli asks Chudala to help the untouchable folk with the money they have saved. He counts it two or three times and puts it into a bag. Valli again shouts and asks how he has multiplied this money.

One day Valli tells Chudalamuttu that she is pregnant. Chudalamuttu feels happy. Valli gives birth to a child. But Chudalamuttu becomes “afraid to take the child in his arms. He is a scavenger. How could he take that child with hands that have cleaned out latrines?” (89). *He doesn’t want this child of him to be a scavenger.* He thinks it several times. Chudala and Valli are carefully brining up the child. One day the father thinks, “This child must be given a name. He knows the names of all the children in Mullaikkal Ward; he has made it his business to know. What name should they choose! As well as a name, his son needed a pet-name” (93). Chudalamuttu names his son – *Mohan* and his pet name will be *Baby*.

The husband and the wife are worried about the future of their son. They plan to buy a house with compound. If the president, who has kept their money with him for safe keeping, denies to return the same to them, they will be ruined. They prey, “May God almighty save us” (107). Amidst their conversations, they come to the point of Mohan’s education. “He – Mohan – must be admitted to a school” (107). But this seems problematic to them. One afternoon, Chudalamuttu goes to a man, who runs a sort of kindergarten for a few children. The teacher looks an orthodox man “who smears sacred ashes on his

forehead, sandalwood paste on his body and so on, and wears a topknot” (107). He asks Chudalamuttu, “Aren’t you the scavenger who lives next to the wealthy land-owner?” (107). Then he becomes serious and asks again, “What made you think of bringing your boy here to study?” (107). Chudala rejoins that it is near to his residence. Then the orthodox teacher begins to speak:

“Hm! anyway, it’s not possible here.” Keeping his eyes on Chudalamuttu’s face, the teacher continued, “It’s not possible here. You understand? What! How could you be so presumptuous? You thought you could bring your children here and have them sit next to these children, didn’t you? That’s a good one” (107-08).

After that Chudalamuttu goes to a government school, which is a little way off. He goes there and find out that the headmaster has gone to his home and he will get an answer the next day. Chudalamuttu goes to the headmaster the next day and he gets an answer that he has sufficient number of students in the class according to the regulations of the government. One day Chudalamuttu gets Mohan ready in shorts and shirts and goes to the school for admission thinking that if a child is beautifully dressed then the teacher will admit him. But when he goes to the school, the teacher recognises him to be a *scavenger’s son*. Then Chudalamuttu thinks of giving a bribe to the teacher for Mohan’s admission. For the purpose, he goes to see the overseer, Keshava Pillai considering that he can solve the problem. The overseer demands twenty rupees for the settlement of admission of Mohan. He agrees to it. He gives Keshava Pillai a sum of twenty rupees. After one week, the overseer informs Chudalamuttu that the teacher has agreed to allow Mohan to take admission but there are two conditions – one is to designate someone else as the boy’s guardian and the second is that he has to give two rupees a month as his fees. Chudalamuttu agrees to this also. Thus an untouchable boy Mohan joins the school “as the nephew of the municipal president’s driver” (109). Mohan begins to go to the school daily.

One day Mohan returns home weeping because the teacher has beaten him in the school. When Valli asks him, he tells her, “He [the teacher] said, “Aren’t you a scavenger’s son? If I tell you, you won’t understand, and he beat me. If the school boss tells us anything, we can’t understand” (114). As far as Mohan is concerned, He has been a brilliant student. He learns fast and remembers properly. The teacher beats him but he doesn’t tell her mother about that. Perhaps he has understood that “if a scavenger’s son goes to study, one must also listen to that; and he must take beatings, too” (115). And one day he tells something which is not an ordinary thought and that makes Valli’s heart aching. And he explodes another suggestion, “Please, tell Dad not to be a scavenger” (115). He has come to the level of a thoughtful man, when he comes to understand such heavy things. He asks another terrible question, “What is a scavenger’s job, mother” (115). Valli becomes dumb and deaf. This question becomes an enormous sea which can’t be crossed by her. How can she tell him the reality? She feels herself unable to explain. So she pretends, “If I tell you, you won’t understand” (115). Then she holds Mohan close to

her. Kisses his forehead, and says with heavy voice, “Son, we are poor people! Just poor people!” (115). This rejoinder cannot satisfy Mohan’s curiosity. The next day, the boys make fun of him by calling him a *scavenger’s son*. He gives some answers and feels himself relieved more or less. A “scavenger’s son does not know what the word scavenger means. But other child of his age knew. They knew because they felt an aversion for scavengers” (116). Valli tells, all the questions asked by Mohan, to Chudalamuttu. Both of them decide to purchase a new house and a compound with the money he has put with the municipal president for safe keeping. He goes to the president and asks for his money. But he gets angry and rebukes Chudala. Valli thinks that they will never get their money back. Then it is impossible to leave the job of a scavenger. But Chudalamuttu reminds that “they are thinking of appointing a watchman for a burial ground in the municipality. There’s a chance he might get the job” (116). Amidst such thoughts that night passes away. The next day Mohan comes home crying and complains his mother that she told him a lie. “A *scavenger* is not a poor person” (117). He has known the truth. He has known the meaning of the word ‘scavenger.’

In Kottuval, on the edge of the road near Chavadi Bridge, a beggar is lying dead. He had passed motion and vomited. He had died of cholera. Suddenly Cholera breaks out in the Alleppey town. Many people die of that and the number of deaths become impossible to count. “This is because the people who die are not included as part of the population of human beings. They are beggars, poor people and such like” (121). After some time it is rumoured that the high caste people have been dying for some time. The people start practicing superstitious activities. They start worshipping goddess Kali. The problematic situation suits to Chudalamuttu and he somehow gets the job of a cemetery watchman. Now he has become free from the filth and stink of his life. Chudalamuttu thinks that he will be spared by the plague if he leaves the job of a scavenger. Many of his old friends are dying one by one. Muniswami dies. Palaniyandi dies and his two children also die. Chudalamuttu and Valli feel an unknown fear of death. “Chudalamuttu believes there is no doubt that he will fall victim to this plague” (127). He beseeches Valli, “When I die, you burry me – but please look after my son. Even if I die, He will grow up” (127). Chudalamuttu sees a group of children who have become orphan. Among them he sees Sundiran’s children who have been orphaned by Chudalamuttu himself. He trembles when he imagines his own son standing and weeping amidst them. His heart aches very hard. He plans to go out from that place. He tells Valli and she also agrees to him. He says, “Let’s go. Let’s get that money and go” (127). He goes to the president of the municipality and asks for his money again gets the same reply. He says that “he did not have money in ready cash at the moment” (127). In fact he is not willing to return Chudala’s money.

Valli bathes Mohan. He goes to play with his beggar friend. When he returns and calls for her mother, she does not respond. He again calls out, “Mother” (132). Again there comes no response. Mohan becomes afraid. He shakes her body. Her eyes are open and she is not sleeping. Mohan is shuddered. By that time, the beggar boy has come inside the house and has viewed everything. He holds the hand of

Mohan and drags him out of the house and takes him far away. Perhaps he has understood that Mohan's mother has died of cholera. Then someone reports that "the previous day, the cemetery watchman had shown signs of cholera. When day dawned, he was to be seen lying dead in the place where he usually stood" (132). Mohan with the beggar boy goes to the cemetery. There he sees, "a body, wrapped round and tied, but with the head and feet still visible" (132). And Mohan comes to know that it is the dead body of his father. He has grown enough to recognise his mother and father even if they are dead. Mohan is left in this wide and cruel world to live and grow alone.

A scavenger's son has become a scavenger's son. Chudalamuttu never dreamt of his son to be a scavenger but it is the role of fate that he becomes so without any effort and willingness. The husband who has wished to die in comfort and luxury and being cared by his wife and the wife wished to die gazing at her husband, both died without their desires being fulfilled. Chudalamuttu gave his son a name, Mohan. The boy grew up without knowing the meaning of the word scavenger. "The father used to be furious on seeing his child lying in dirt for even a short while. *But today that child is a scavenger in Alleppey town.* His superiors raise their eyebrow when they learn that his name is Mohan!" (135). Pichandi's son and Sundiran's son are also scavengers with Mohan. Like Chudalamuttu, Mohan also goes out to work in the morning with the same bucket and shovel. Firstly he cleans the latrines, and then by ten o'clock he gathers all the filth in the drums put by the road side and by noon he put those drums of filth into the night-soil lorry that comes that way. In the evening he can be seen with his friends, in fine clothes at the beach, at the park or at the cinema or at the market place. The scavengers of today have become conscious of their rights and duties. Their Dalit consciousness is visible in their day-to-day life. They have known that before the law of the nation, all are equal. But their equality seems insolence to the caste Hindus. They think that scavengers have become obstinate. They have become their equals. They use clean and fine clothes. They use soap to take a bath. They use telecom powder. They smoke cigarette. Now they are not subservient. The complaints of the caste Hindus are true because, the scavengers have begun realising that they are human beings. Now they have power of vengeance against their suppression.

One day the three friends recollect their childhood memories. Pichandi's son and Sundiran's son, try to remember some and Mohan also. Then there occurs a hot discussion among the three. Suddenly Mohan goes to the beach, alone. Some of the memories come to the fore-front of his mind. He reminds that there was his mother who loved him and his father who never kissed him. They wanted to make him a man of some considerable status, but not a scavenger at all. Then he reminds, "They had money. Yes, he had heard his father working it out. That amount was with the president" (138). He feels himself uneasy. That whole money was the life-blood of his father who worked hard and earned that money. The desires of revenge begin to blossom in his heart. He becomes furious. "He has started dreaming about the

blaze of fire rising into the sky and about the spilling of blood. He does not know what the fire will feed on, nor from whose chest the blood will gush out” (138).

One day the old municipal president inaugurates his huge beautiful mansion. There is no building in the whole town like that. Mohan and his two friends are also present there. They are watching the building with anger and hatred. Mohan’s heart is burning with fury. His dream has taken a definite shape. His two friends help him in his strategy. He tells them, “I just want to know what the sum of money was that my father entrusted to him for me” (138). Sundiran’s son evokes him, “Your father’s desire to become a man of wealth and position is mixed with your blood also. The desire of revenge stems from that” (139). The two friends assure him, “Anyhow, we shall always be behind you for everything” (139). One night, it is too late and Mohan has not returned home. The two friends are worried. Then they hear a knock at the door. They open it and there they see that it is Mohan, who is out of breath and sweating profusely. Pichandi’s son asks, “What is it Mohan?” (142). He doesn’t speak, but he points outside through an open window, and there at a distance they see flames dancing high in the sky. The old president’s mansion is burning. Mohan feels relieved. His emotions are satisfied. The next day, there takes place a procession. Mohan is walking in the front with a large flag in his hand. A crowd of scavengers is moving forward for their rights, under his leadership. “With tears in their eyes Pichandi’s son and Sundiran’s son each put a red garland on him”(143). When the procession reaches the town, it has been reduced to one third of the crowd. The comrades have been shot down at three places. But the procession moves on. The seed of Dalit consciousness sown by their forefathers, the scavengers of today are getting benefit by that. This movement will never stop in the way. It has become perpetual. “Some years have passed. When the sand was washed away, a few skeletons could be clearly seen on the mound. On the neck of one skeleton, a few red threads are visible” (143). Undoubtedly, the skeleton with red threads is of Mohan who died in the struggle against the authority. He was the leader of that procession. A scavenger’s son always produces a scavenger’s son but Chudalamuttu’s desire has been fulfilled by Mohan because, he dies as bachelor. He produces no scavenger.

Conclusion: Dalit consciousness grows slowly and steadily. The scavengers of the previous generations were subservient but today’s are ready to agitate against the injustice inflicted upon them. They know their rights as well as their duties. They have known the importance of money. They cannot be cheated any more like their forefathers. They can wear fine clothes. They can drink fresh and pure water. They can make money. They can build new houses. And moreover they can get education where ever they want. The Dalit consciousness has made them strong and independent. But they have miles to go before they get absolute equality.

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