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Scavengers and their Vulnerabilities in *Scavenger's Son*

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Shivashankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (1947), originally written in Malayalam in 1947 and later translated into English by R.E. Asher in 1952 is about three generations (Ishkkumuttu, Chudalamuttu and Mohan) of a scavenger's family in the social situation of the period, which is markedly pre-independence. The necessary context of Indian social infrastructure is to be taken into consideration. The scavengers are at the rock bottom of Indian society. Unfortunately, the social stratification, which was perceived to function, as early on its conception has eventually become part of hegemonic perpetuation thereby keeping certain sections of people at the receiving end in the name of lower caste. In this context, Gita Ramaswamy, a social thinker, has the following to state: "Whatever they are called, they belong to the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy: they are untouchables. Indeed, manual scavenging and Untouchability – caste discrimination – go together".

Pillai's novel depicts the inhuman treatment meted out to fellow human beings only because they happen to be scavengers. The story of the novel is principally about three generations of a scavenger's family and how each generation tackles the degrading social institution and the inhuman practice of discrimination. They are the poorest of the poor, often living away from the mainstream of the society: "If India has not been able to do away with a practice that is admittedly, 'a blot on humanity', it is because the issue goes beyond poverty, indifference, lack of awareness or a reluctant to switch from traditional practices. Manual scavenging is rooted in caste as surely as caste is rooted in the nation's psyche." (Zaidi 2006: 9).

They live in utter unhygienic conditions; disease and illnesses are part of their lives. They are truly the dregs of humanity. The first generation represented by Ishkkumuttu, lived in complete compliance to social expectations. He lived the life of a scavenger never even thinking about alternative possibilities. Although he lives in poverty, he is so mentally conditioned that he cannot visualize a different and a better life, he simply takes life as it comes. He works as a scavenger for more than three decades, clearing and cleansing the caste Hindus and always being at their mercy. He knows the people of each house in Alleppy.

It is understood that the very miserable death of Ishukkumuttu was the result of the attitude of the orthodox Hindu Society. They refused to provide water and food for the ailing old scavenger who served society for about three decades. They did not show gratitude to the selfless and committed scavenger nor did they show any humanity towards an ailing old man of society. He did not have access to the burial ground where the dead bodies of the Hindus are cremated. When Ishukkumuttu died, his dead body was buried near the night soil depot; and the stray dogs dug it out in a very deplorable way.

Therefore, he suffers and dies remaining a testimony to the damning legacy of the Hindu caste system. The description of Ishukkumuttu's life is similar to the slave narratives of American culture. Although Ishukkumuttu is theoretically within the framework of Hindu system, his position is very precarious. His dignity as a human being is taken away. He is forced to perform menial labour which the other caste Hindus will never dream of doing, and despite of all his efforts, his humanity is never recognized. He simply remains a pathetic figure suffering pain for the only reason that he is born into the much-despised caste.

As long as Ishukkumuttu accepts his identity within the framework of existing Hindu caste paradigm, he has no possibilities of salvation. The generations to come will have to carry the burden of caste discrimination. Unless the caste configuration in Hindu system is completely re-structured and reformed from the point of view of humanistic and natural justice, there is no redemption for their lives. The only alternative is to move away from Hindu caste paradigm there by rejecting it completely and choosing a different identity where discrimination and prejudice have no role to play in dealing with human beings.

When he falls ill, he sends his son Chudalamuttu to inform the overseer about it. In the absence of his father, the son has to substitute him. The father however tutors him about each house, their conditions and attitudes of the people. Apparently, his son has a different attitude towards the profession of scavenging. In this novel, he attempts to escape from the humiliating circumstances of scavenging. Although, initially Chudala thought of going against the very capitalist system, later on, he attempted to escape wisely from the system. He was a silent sufferer and a mute witness to the most condemned work called 'scavenging'. He endeavoured to come out of the profession. But was reluctant to do so and was forced to remain one. He was a keen observer and possessed a good deal of foresight. He had his own dreams of freeing his children from the clutches of this hereditary scavenging permanently.

Unlike his father, he breaks free from the social conditioning and dreams of an alternative life pattern. When his father eventually dies thus ending the first generation of scavenging family, his son Chudalamuttu visualizes the formation of a union along with other scavengers which can oversee and stream line the material aspect of their profession. When things become complicated, he quickly becomes an informer to the authorities and thereby acts as a betrayer to his own community. In due course of time, he saves some money

by staying away from alcohol. He keeps this money with the municipal chairman hoping that someday he can have a decent place of his own. Chudala was more particular than he doesn't like his son to become a scavenger; instead, he wished to see his son as a doctor, judge, or president of Municipality. He wanted him to be strong and healthy, and hence he started bringing home some pills that were usually taken by well-do women when they were pregnant. He cautioned his wife against doing tiresome work. Thus, he took many precautionary measures to help his wife bear a healthy child.

But when he saw his new-born child he was reluctant a bit to take him into his arms and touch him lovingly. The obvious reasons for his aversion was that he was a scavenger and had the dirt of latrines that he cleaned, and he did not want to malign his son. But when he learnt that his son was born on an inauspicious day and that some sort of bad thing would happen to either of the parents, he felt distressed. He prayed that his son and wife should live long and nothing bad should happen to them.

Chudala named his son 'Mohan' and called him by a pet name 'Baby' fondly. He even told this in all the houses where he cleaned the latrines and thus challenged against the very attitude of the upper-class people. When she knew that the Scavenger's Son was called Mohan, the wife of the lawyer Kurup burst out laughing. This laughter did not just make Chudalammuttu feel small. It shocked and testified him. It was not only the mockery that filled the laughter; it also sounded as if a scavenger had no right to give his child a name". (Pillai 93) Mohan had a partly entertaining childhood. As he grew up, his reasoning and inquisitiveness too increased. He befriended a boy from a rich class and a beggar boy with equal enthusiasm. He started asking his mother what a scavenger was. But Chudala was determined to bring up the boy concealing his own identity under any circumstances.

Chudala after so many desperate attempts to admit his son to school finally had broken the unwritten law by sending him to school to learn to write and read. The boy was admitted as the nephew of municipal president's driver and was seen always neatly dressed while going to school. Both Chudala and Valli were quite happy that they were able to send their boy to a school but were equally worried as to how long they would be able to conceal the truth from him. Mohan's parents did not want their son to become a scavenger. But ultimately he took up a bucket and a shovel like his father and soon many others like him turned to the same profession. The pattern is clear; Ishukku had made no choice at all; Chudala makes a wrong choice. But Mohan, far from continuing his father's pretensions, honestly and aggressively makes the fact of his being an untouchable a cause to fight against the higher class. Chudalammuttu partially succeeded in changing his class but he could not affect the static caste system.

When small pox and cholera strike Alleppy, the scavengers are the most vulnerable people since they live in unclean surroundings near the 'night soil depot'. After a while, Chudala becomes a security guard at a graveyard because when his son Mohan is admitted in school with a pseudo father's name, it became virtually impossible for him to continue as a scavenger. In fact, scavenger children are not allowed in school and therefore he invents a fake name admits him in school. His son's name Mohan also is unusual for their community and is promptly derided by his fellow community. When Alleppey is infested with cholera, he realizes that mostly his own people had died along with a few others. By and large, the caste Hindus of Alleppy makes every effort to prevent the disease. Chudala finally decides to collect his money from the municipal chairman, in order to escape the communicable diseases and move to a safe place elsewhere. But unfortunately, the municipal chairman cheats him. Chudala who actually believed in him and served him for years and the hard-earned money, which was entrusted with the president, was denied to him.

Thus, disappointed and being aware that his wife Valli and he cannot escape the plague, he gradually succumbs to the disease and dies. Mohan recalled his memories of his parents and their dreams of buying a house and a compound for him. They lived for him and died for him sake, but their dreams remained unfulfilled. They entrusted a sum of money, which was never returned. The president had built the largest mansion in the town. Mohan was waiting to pay the president in the same coin by destroying his dream mansion. He led a huge demonstration, a demonstration of the rights, hunger and anger of scores of beggars, scavengers and other labourers in the town. In this state of chaos and confusion, which prevailed more than a week in the town, Mohan took revenge on the President and realizes his dream by setting his mansion on fire. The president destroyed his parents' dreams and so Mohan ruined his dream mansion.

However, Scavenger's Son becoming a scavenger and tries to free himself from his past by acquiring money, status and education. He dreams of a change in his social status and of a new life of dignity minus the "cowardly and humble expression." Which had been a hallmark of the Untouchables for generations? He admits that there is no escape for him from his social environment but he wishes to make life better for the generations that flow from him – "The house must grow into a big mansion" (Pillai 43). "But these acquisitions bring no relief. Instead Chudalamuttu is alienated from his own group and finds no place in the other. His only concern is for this own welfare and there is an increasing aloofness both from humanity and human beings." (Singh 1982: 125-126)

Perhaps this novel has presented the older generation of Isukumuttu who seemed to have accepted the ill treatment by the caste Hindus, the generations of Chudalamuttu who aspired to free them from the bondage of scavenging and the modern generation of Chudalamuttu's son, Mohan who is an unsuccessful modern hero.

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