

When Birth Determines Destiny: an Appraisal of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Thottiyude Makan

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Abstract

Certain values, norms and customs are deeply rooted in our culture. Though some of these are challenged, many may not be subjected to change. A caste based society like India, has, since time immemorial given priority to the ascribed status. Despite personal achievements and accomplishments, even today, we see people getting dishonored in the name of their low caste affiliation. This paper which revolves around Thottiyude Makan unfurls the pathetic plight of the underprivileged and their destiny to come out of the casteist webs spun by the society. Thakazhi's ThottiyudeMakan (Scavenger's Son), adjudged as a socio-political document unravels the story of three generations of scavengers. The novel penned in 1947, the year of India's independence indeed created a great literary revolution.

KEYWORDS-Caste, Scavengers, Status, Society, Exploitation

Thakazhi is widely recognized as the writer who has given voice to the peasant life of Travancore. He was influenced by the Marxian ideology and Freudian theory and actively participated in the Writer's Movement and the literary circle led by Kesari Balakrishnapillai. He entered into the Malayalam literary arena challenging the refined attitude of the elite class. He proclaimed that there exists an Indian language known as Malayalam which has a rich repository of literature. Along with him, P.KeshavaDev, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, S.K.Pottekkatt and P.C.Kuttikrishnan constituted the Pentagon that inaugurated the Renaissance novel in Malayalam. Like William Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" or R.K.Narayan's "Malgudi", Kuttanad is the locale of Thakazhi and thirty-six of his novels are centred on Kuttanad and its lifestyle. Being a member of the agrarian family, he showed a keen interest in the life of farmers and depicted it as he found it in the raw form with. He belongs to the Thakazhi village of Kuttanad Thaluk and his literary firmament is the complex world comprising the miseries and hardships of the coolie workers, scavengers, and middle-class multitudes of the Kuttanad region. It is an amazing geographical area on the banks of river Pamba manifesting the natural beauty of Kerala. Known by the sobriquet "rice granary of Kerala", the lives of people hailing from Kuttanad is vested in the farmlands and paddy fields. Right from the regime of Kings and landlords, it remained as a place apart from all other regions of Kerala even in its social relationships. The Progressive Literature Movement that gathered new momentum in the North under the leadership of Munshi Premchand and Harindranath Chattopadhyay exercised its sway on the Kerala writers infused with a revolutionary zeal on many Malayali writers including Thakazhi. They were provided with the intellectual leadership by two scholar-critics Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and M.P.Paul. Like Premchand, Thakazhi brought realism to Malayalam fiction in his own way and championed the cause of the

marginalized sections of a specific regional community with profound sympathy. He saw the scary sides of their life and portrayed it vividly. “The underdeveloped nature of the land where he was born and the backwardness of the people among whom he grew up became a source of inspiration and strength for one who was destined to be its eloquent chronicler.” (Paniker 1). All his 600-odd short stories, around 40 novels, innumerable articles, speeches, biographical writings and travelogues throb with the concern for mankind. His famous novels are *Kayar* (Coir), *ThottiyudeMakan* (The Scavenger’s Son), *Enippadikal* (Rungs of the Ladder), *Ouseppinte Makkal* (The Children of Ouseph), *Thyagathinu Prathiphalam* (The Reward for Sacrifice), *Anubhavgal Palichakal* (Experiences and Failures) and short stories are “*Oru Kuttanadan Katha*” (The story of Kuttanad), “*Putumalar*” (New Flower), “*AdyathePrasavam*” (First Confinement), “*Vellappokkathil*” (In the Flood), “*OruSadharana Thookkikkola*” (An Ordinary Hanging), “*Sthalam Mattam*” (Transfer), “*Adiyozhukkukal*”(Undercurrents), “*Thahassildarude Acchan*”(The Tahsildar’s Father), “*Manchuvattil*” (Under the Mango Tree), “*Asthikoodathinte Katha*” (The Story of the Skeleton), “*Theyilathottathil*” (In the Tea Estate), “*Paramparyam*” (Tradition), “*Vimochanam*” (Liberation), “*MoornuThalamurakal*” (Three Generations), “*Mathente Katha*” (Mathen’s Story), “*Bus Stand Vare*” (Upto the Bus Stand), “*Pattalakkaran*” (The Soldier), “*AaNanayam*” (That Coin), “*Ithanu Sanmargi*” (Here’s the Moralist), “*ArupathamVayassil*” (In the Sixtieth Year), “*Dhanikante Makan*” (The Richman’s Son), “*AnathaMayyath*” (Unclaimed Corpse), “*Sahodaryam*” (Brotherhood), “*Kurudante Charitharyam*” (A Blind man’s Contentment), “*VeluthaKunju*” (The Fair-Skinned Baby), “*AaSundariyudeBhartavu*” (That Beautiful Woman’s Husband), “*Kallushappil*” (In the Liquor Shop), “*Dallal*” (Broker), “*Kalyaniyude Katha*” (The Story of Kalyani), “*Oru Sadharana Tyagam*” (An Ordinary Sacrifice), “*Nithyakanyaka*”(Virgin Forever), “*Inquilab*”(Revolution), “*NjanPiranna Nadu*” (The Land Where I was Born), “*Chapalyam*” (Childishness), “*Kettuthaliyude Katha*” (The Story of Wedding Locket) etc. He is also known for his biographical writings titled *EnteBalyakala Katha* (My childhood Story), *OrmayudeTheerangalil* (On the Shores of Memory) and *EnteVakeelJeevitham*. His works run through the whole gamut of human emotions. His realism devoid of great pomp and show of elite culture presents him as an artist who is in love with the poor and hates those who exploit them. Thakazhi emerges as the champion of the common man inaugurating the era of social realism in Malayalam literature. Thakazhi’s *ThottiyudeMakan*(Scavenger’s Son), adjudged as a socio-political document unravels the story of three generations of scavengers. The novel penned in 1947, the year of India’s independence indeed created a great literary revolution. Dr. Ayyappa Paniker has rightly appraised *Thottiyude Makan* thus:

More than a pure literary work, *Thottiyude Makan* was an eloquent manifesto that carried the message of the change in process to the suffering millions, doomed in their fatalism and dumb for centuries. Thakazhi’s effort is not to portray vividly the miseries of the poor anymore; he has come away from the early days of naturalism. What he wants is not to draw the sympathy of the upper classes to the untold indignities heaped on the scavengers and the abject poverty in which they were born and lived, and died. There have been literary works in Malayalam earlier also which moved the readers to pity the poor. Thakazhi’s attempt is to hold up a model before the workers themselves by which

they will be able to change the conditions in which they are living. Not what others should think about the workers, but what they can do themselves. His effort is to instil faith in the workers as a class so that they do not have to depend on anybody's sympathy or understanding to change their living conditions. It is in this sense that Thakazhi's mentor, A. Balakrishna Pillai, called *Thottiyude Makan* an expressionist novel. (Paniker 78)

Thottiyude Makan with a straightforward plot starts with the last days of Ishukkumuthu, Chudalamuthu's father and it ends with the death of Mohan, Chudalamuthu's son, by police-firing. Ishukkumuthu serves as a scavenger in Alleppy municipal town for thirty years without earning anything. His wife dies a year after the birth of their only son Chudalamuthu. After the hard work of continuous years, Ishukkumuthu is now in ill-health and his son Chudalamuthu has an innate aversion for the shabby work of a scavenger. But the day before his father's demise, Chudalamuthu is forced to take up the job and follow his father's path. He takes a serious vow that he won't become close with his co-workers and he will never bring up his children as latrine cleaners. When Ishukkumuthu dies, Chudalamuthu cannot find the money required for the burial. The dead body is buried in the night soil depot, from where it is pulled out by dogs. His father's death turns out to be a message. Hence, he cherishes the desire of climbing the social ladder. He keeps himself away from fellow scavengers as he wishes to live like other decent people. The experience that he had on in his father's death shoves him to the state of seclusion. He builds a hut apart from the depot where the other scavengers inhabit. He compels his wife Valli not to speak with their neighbours and he does not even like the aunt of his wife coming to his home, who brought her up from childhood. His crucial intention is to make his son someone other than a scavenger. He does not sit and eat with his son, Mohan. He refuses to touch his son when the mid-wife asked him to take the baby. He later takes the child, and then he gives him back at once. He has never felt such a distaste to himself being a scavenger. He tells himself that his son must grow up without becoming intimate to a scavenger. Chudalamuthu is drawn to those aspects of his dream world that he observes in the lives of the upper castes while working at their houses. He absorbs something daily from the lives of the upper castes and tries to translate them into his life. But his vision is a broad one, extending into his future generations. What he aspires for is not just a better life for himself or his wife, on the other hand, it is a new world for his son and his subsequent generations. Chudalamuthu says, "Then we must leave the place. My child must not suffer any more insults like this. He has found out he's a scavenger's son; but at least when he grows up let him not suffer this disgrace" (Pillai 90). Thus his concern for the destiny of his son in a wider perspective reflects his concern for the destiny of the community as a whole.

Chudalamuthu grooms himself not as an ordinary scavenger. He is always physically robust. He has an upright physique with a manly appearance and curly hair. He is distinguished from the other fellow-scavengers by his washed clothes and disciplined life. He does not appear to be an ordinary scavenger. He never drinks, and he takes baths daily and wears a neat vest and shorts unlike other scavengers. These assets differentiate him from others and in fact gives him a chance to lead his own clan and render them

goodwill. He is a person who sees and understands things. He is well built. Pillai observes:

If we look at him closely once again, we shall observe that in the depths of his eyes the cringing and deferential expression of a scavenger is not seen. Who takes bath every day, a scavenger who shaves, a scavenger who wears a dhoti or shorts that he has either washed or had laundered.(18)

Chudalamuthu has decided not to remain as a scavenger and his generation not to become scavengers. Chudalamuttu feels dirty about himself because of the mean work which he does and the environment operating in the lives of outcasts. Chudalamuthu becomes aware of the strong influence of such forces when his son insists on eating with him from the same bowl. Thakazhi describes him thus:

Chudalamuthu was taken aback. Yes, he was really taken aback. He had never imagined that such a demand would be made. The boy wants to eat rice that has been mixed with the curry by his father's hands, the same hands that have cleaned out the latrines. (80)

Chudalamuthu never wishes to become a scavenger. But, once he has become a scavenger, he decides to rise above the level of the tarnished life of the scavengers. He asks himself, "Cannot a scavenger live like a human being?"(2). To the astonishment of others in his colony, he refuses to accept usual left-over- food given to a scavenger, "because of that his obstinacy increased and he resolved not to take anything(3)". According to his own plans and out of hopelessness, Chudalamuttu wants to do everything to lead a happy life. He betrays his own community and its values; deceives the closest friends; commits fraud and embezzles. He does all this with a persuasion that nothing is dear to him when compared with his mission in life, he feels that he must commit any heinous crime. Pichandi had been his friend; he still was. No one else had found the same genuine happiness in the way Chudalamuthu had improved himself. His going up in the world was source of pride of Pichandi. No one else had stood by Chudalamuthu in his time of trouble. Though Chudalamuthu is a close friend of him, he becomes instrumental to the utter ruin and disintegration of Pichandi and his family. In the process of his dehumanization, he allows himself to be a pawn at the hands of his employers who tempt him with false promises and use him against his fellow-men to be later cheated and discarded. He typifies the pliable workers who fall into the trap of the systems to be used to undermine and destroy the ambitions and movements of the working class. Chudalamuthu is detained with a great sense of cynicism and utter desolation, he laments to his wife: "Do you know why our kid was not admitted to school? If a scavenger's children start getting educated-then people worry that there will no longer be any scavenger"(88).

Chudalamuthu is quick to learn the tricks of the trade and if he goes slow with the scavenging job, he would be cared for by the rich people who depend a lot on his daily services. The overseer is a clever man and there is no point in fighting with him. Hence, it is better to bribe him and get him into his good books. He knows that his ambitions of possessing a piece of land and a house and of shaping a new destiny for his son can all be realized only with money. So his immediate concern in life is to make as much money as

possible. He is drawn to the ways of those that he opposes, seeing how the clever can manipulate the corrupt system for his own benefit. He joins hands together with the president and overseer, who are as his clan's enemies and exploiters. With the order of the president, Chudalamuthu and overseer Kesavapillai put their hands and heads together to thrash the union. Behind this action of Chudalamuthu is the deep rooted psychological problem, that the society forced him to do the scavenging, and he does not want to remain a scavenger. This impulse makes him to separate himself from his people and join hands with authorities. He believes in his superiors, thinking only they can release him from the hateful work, but they have no concern about his desire. Instead of treating them as his enemy, for his self-centered reasons he makes them his cronies. But the superiors are clear in their idea of scalping the scavengers. Chudalamuthu's dreams turns topsyturvy within a day, when cholera shows its awful face in Alleppey. When Chudalamuthu is elated that he has become a watchman in the cemetery, the enchantment was not viable. Chudalamuthu and his wife Valli also become victims of the mortal disease, and they die leaving their only son Mohan alone. Mohan becomes a scavenger; unlike his father he is aware of his identity and he is clear in fixing his allies and enemies. He is wise enough to make a discrepancy between the exploiters and exploited. He has a clear memory of his father's money, amassed by the president. Mohan immolates the president's new building. Next day he leads a procession, now Pichandi's son and Sundiran's son are with Mohan. They harmonize with the leadership of Mohan.

Pillai's ThottiyudeMakan portrays the unresolved social problems of the untouchables and expose the inhuman and unjust authority of caste Hindus over all the untouchables who are the part and parcel of the society. Chudalamuthu being an outcaste is not allowed to rise in the society and secure material means for himself and his family. He is not even permitted to lead an honourable and independent life. It is the social structure that enforces them to sell their labour but compel them to live the underdog's life. The older generation of Ishukkumuthu is passive and unaware and he is averse to any change in the age old social order. But the next one of Chudalamuthu with its widening consciousness dislikes the prevailing social order and tries to escape it.

The younger generation of Mohan with its higher level of awareness and revolutionary fervor seeks to abolish the old social order and to inaugurate a new one. Mohan fails to shatter the feeling of revenge and commit himself to the Union's discipline. At the close of the novel, Mohan participates in the massive demonstration and sacrifices his life in the police firing. By such delineation of his heroes, revealing some weakness in their attitude and behaviour, Thakazhi stresses on the need of cultivating certain ideologically desirable conduct patterns by those who devote themselves to the workers cause. He symbolizes the spirit of revolt against the social systems and structures that deny to poor people their liberty and their right to live. At the end, he leads a massive demonstration of the untouchables, workers, lepers and beggars. "His flag was fluttering in the breeze. The crowd, unarmed and possessing only spiritual strength moved forward under the leadership of the scavenger's son. His face bore the serious and resolute expression befitting a leader" (115). Though the procession is reduced to one fourth as a result of the police firing at three places, it moves forward braving the bullets. Mohan's detriment of his life in the heroic struggle for the deliverance of the evicted masses of people marks the pinnacle in the process of revolutionary changes in society.

The novel *Thottiyude Makan* unveils the ills of the society in which one can witness the whole of India. Thakazhi expects the people to be aware of the evil effects of the prevailing socio-economic system and impress upon them the need of toppling the system through a radical change in the social order. The novel provides an insight into the deeper social forces that transmute the social fabric and try to capture the spirit of their times and reveal the historical development. It shows man's progress along the paths of history, his realization of his own role as the maker of history. Thakazhi analyses both the internal and the external factors that obstruct the society on its way to change with their powerful portrayal of the ruinous effects of capitalism and landlordism on various social groups like farm labourers, scavengers and others. The social concern is the sole catalyst that enabled Thakazhi to look closely at the lives of the downtrodden generation. Thakazhi present show the castaways live in inhuman conditions are subjected to worst kind of humiliation without any cause at times. The ascribed status of their birth in lower caste families compel them to take up their hereditary job of cleaning and sweeping the latrines. Hence, posterity cannot willing let these deprived human characters die from their mental psyche.

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