

# Conscientization and Subaltern Resistance: A Freirean Reading of Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* and Jaladas's *Ramgolam*

**Khandakar Ashraful Islam**

Department of English

Noakhali Science and Technology University, Bangladesh

Email: ashraf.2205@nstu.edu.bd

**Abstract** The scavengers referred to as Harijans or *Methars*—belong to that downtrodden subaltern class who are religiously exploited, socially humiliated, economically deprived, and politically unrepresented. Two notable works on scavengers—Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and Thakazhi Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (1975)—depicted the plights of this subaltern group from two different perspectives. In contrast to these two representations of the scavengers, Harishankar Jaladas's *Ramgolam* (2019) stands on a different paradigm. *Ramgolam*, in fact, stretching its focus from the inception of untouchability and casteism, lands in the present-day scenario of Bangladesh, where these subalterns became the worst victims of the modified recruitment policy of the scavengers by the city corporation authority. Taking Paulo Freire's conscientization as a theoretical framework, this paper analyzes Jaladas's *Ramgolam* to argue on the scavengers' capability to reflect on their concrete objective reality to develop their conscientization (critical consciousness) to resist all exploitation strongly. Furthermore, exploring the three novels on manual scavenging, it attempts to investigate how, without traditional education, these scavengers, through interrogation and reflection on their oppressed reality, can evolve through the four stages of development of conscientization (thematization, codification, decodification, and action) to challenge the authority for breaking the age-old shackles of oppression. Finally, inquiring into the above-mentioned points, it examines whether, with a developed conscientization, these scavengers are able to amass strength to raise their voice and form strong resistance, or they are still vulnerable to be violently silenced to speak or resist only “through dying” (Spivak, *The Nation* 1).

**Keywords** Manual scavenging; Scavenger's destitution; culture of silence; conscientization; resistance

**Author** **Dr. Khandakar Ashraful Islam** serves as Associate Professor in the Department of English at Noakhali Science and Technology University, Bangladesh. His scholarly work is situated within the fields of postcolonial studies, subaltern literatures, and Indian literature in English. He has contributed numerous articles to esteemed, peer-reviewed academic journals. He is presently engaged in a substantive research project that investigates the historical and contemporary conditions, lived experiences, and sociocultural struggles of scavenger communities in India and Bangladesh.

### **Introduction**

Paulo Freire, a famous educationist and critical thinker, used *conscientização*, which translates into English as conscientization, to refer to a critical approach to reality which arouses emancipatory consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Freire emphatically differentiates between consciousness and conscientization to accentuate that becoming conscious is not sufficient to develop a critical stance; rather, an individual or community needs to engage in a dialectical relationship with the oppressive structure of the world around them to develop emancipatory consciousness. In fact, in the process of conscientization individuals mandatorily needs to learn “to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, *Pedagogy* 35) for entering into the emancipatory praxis. Enhancing the capability of critical reflection and building solidarity conscientization encourages individuals to recover their own agency and empower them to form resistance against all forms of repression. For the subaltern, conscientization is a process of liberation where the oppressed “must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire, *Pedagogy* 65-66). Antonio Gramsci, in his ground-breaking work *Prison Notebooks*, coined the term subaltern to refer to “the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his agents” (Louai 5).

In Notebook 25 entitled “On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups),” Gramsci extends the term to include the “slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups” (Green 2). In congruence with Gramsci’s inclusion of the deprived and the underprivileged as a subaltern social group, the *Methars*—also known as the Harijans or Dalit scavengers in a derogatory way—who are manually engaged in cleaning human feces and pisses from open lavatories and victims of extreme caste

and class oppression can also be considered as subaltern. Among all the subalterns, the scavengers are the most deprived and the most dejected ones. Being victims of caste oppression, subjugation, humiliation, and extreme poverty, this hapless scavenging community has no voice; therefore, they “cannot speak” (Spivak 104). Moreover, in literature, there is very little representation of this community.

Through Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and Thakzhi Pillai’s *Scavenger’s Son*, published in 1935 and 1975 respectively, although the plights of the scavengers got some representation, apparently, in these two novels, no strong stance of scavengers’ conscientization and resistance is exhibited. In comparison to these two earlier novels, Harishankar Jaladas’s *Ramgolam* (2019) not only widens the canvas of the scavenger’s historiography but also sheds light on the scavenger’s conscientization, which, as a critical praxis, strengthens them to form all-out resistance against the age-old matrices of exploitation. Focusing on Jaladas’s *Ramgolam*, this paper is a retrospective inquiry into the lives of the scavengers from Anand’s narrative to Jaladas’s, to explore whether, the passage of such a long time of more than seven decades (1935-2019), have brought any remarkable change in the lived experience of the scavengers or they are still entrapped in the pristine stratagem of caste oppression, poverty and illiteracy as depicted in the earlier novels. Furthermore, taking Paulo Freire’s conscientization as a theoretical framework this paper will explore the scavengers’ capability to reflect on their reality critically, and engage in a dialogue with their situation so that being critically aware of it they might develop their conscientization to “take possession of their reality and become engaged in the task of transforming it permanently” (Freire, *Conscientização* 1979). It will also investigate how, without traditional education, these scavengers—the most downtrodden of the subaltern—by interrogating into and reflecting on their oppressed reality can evolve through the four stages of development of conscientization (thematization, codification, decodification, and action) to challenge the authority to break the age-old shackles of oppression. Finally, inquiring into the above-mentioned points, it will also examine whether, with a developed conscientization, these scavengers can amass strength to raise their voice and form strong resistance against all injustices or whether they are still voiceless to speak or resist only “through dying” (Spivak, *The Nation* 1).

### **Literary Representation of Scavengers: Bakha to Ramgolam**

Mulk Raj Anand, in *Untouchable*, henceforth *UT*, through Bakha’s and Sohini’s humiliation by the upper caste people, reveals the bleak side of untouchability and exposes the hypocrisy of the upper caste Hindu. Thakzhi Pillai’s *Scavenger’s Son*,

henceforth *SS*, on the other hand, depicts Chudalamuttu's struggle to erode his identity as a scavenger and his betrayal to his scavenging community. The research done on these two novels is focused only on the victimization of the untouchables under caste oppression and the hypocrisy of the upper caste to exploit this deprived community in the name of religion. No earlier work used Freire's conscientization theory to evaluate the resisting power of the Dalit scavengers. Harishankar Jaladas's Bengali novel *Ramgolam* (2012), henceforth *RG*, was translated into English by Quazi Mostain Billah in 2019. The only research work done on *Ramgolam* is a Bhabhaian reading of the text. Hence, the argumentation of this paper on the development of conscientization (critical consciousness) and the potency of resistance of the scavengers is an unexplored area that might provide novel insight into subaltern resistance.

*Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son* do not depict any development of conscientization in the scavenging community of that time. The then scavengers had no access to education and no right to form any union. On many grounds, it can be argued that neither Bakha nor Chudalamuttu, the protagonists of *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son*, respectively, were true representatives of the scavenging community. Bakha was the son of a Jomadar (overseer)—a superintendent of the scavengers. His father was well paid. Hence, Bakha's life was less troublesome than that of other scavengers. Bakha had a fascination with creating a new identity, imitating the British soldiers. Anand writes that observing the lifestyle of the British soldiers, Bakha "had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life...so he tried to copy them in everything" (*UT* 3). Bakha had no fellow feelings. He was self-centered and preoccupied with his personal struggles as a member of a lower caste. Chudalamuttu had no desire to uplift the position of his fellow scavengers. He was "determined that none of the generation that follows from him shall ever be a scavenger" (*SS* 30). To gain the favor of municipality president and secure a better future for himself, Chudalamuttu secretly exposed the union's confidential information to the municipality president, thereby thwarting all the rebellious actions of the scavengers' union. In fact, Chudalamuttu was used as a weapon "in the hands of the municipality to destroy his friends" (*SS* 114). With Chudalamuttu's betrayal of his community, the municipality continued to exploit the scavengers. Hence, Chudalamuttu is not representative of the scavengers either. On the other hand, both Gurucharan and *Ramgolam*, two prime characters in *Ramgolam*, embody the spirit of resistance and bear the true emblem of the scavenging community. Gurucharan, driven by his fellow feelings and commitment to his community, dedicated himself to a new subjectivity, working both to

ensure education for the children of scavengers and to demand the due rights for his class. Moreover, *Ramgolam*—a half-learned teenager—from his developed conscientization worked diligently to unite the scavenging community to form an all-out resistance against the oppressors for their survival.

### **A Close Overview of Scavengers' Plights**

The time setting of *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son* is the first half of the twentieth century. The sanitary system in India, at that time, was solely dependent on manual scavenging. All the scavengers were deployed to clean the human feces across India. The community had a dire need for the services of scavengers to maintain a healthy and clean living. Their job was valuable to society. Both *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son* depicted the scavengers who were engaged in manual scavenging. As Bakha worked as a sweeper, cleaning the toilets of the soldiers and the roadside latrines, Chudalamuttu and his fellow mates moved from house to house to haul human feces. At that time, only the scavengers were compelled to do the filthy work of scavenging. The filthiness of the job of scavenging is elaborately delineated in *Ramgolam*:

As a rule, they [scavengers] were supposed to begin work before sunrise. The Chittagong Municipal Corporation had two types of trucks; one kind for hauling garbage and the other for hauling human feces. There were three jalopy trucks for hauling road-side garbage. Very early in the morning the Methars, collecting garbage from lanes and by lanes and carrying them to trolleys, deposited them on the sides of the main roads and then it was hauled on the trucks and dumped by the sea side in Halishahar and into the ditches of Bahaddarhut. (RG 14)

Due to the filthiness of this job, only the untouchables had been compelled to carry out this job for centuries. In fact, upper-caste people did not permit the scavengers to do any other job. As an unwritten law, the job of scavenging was reserved for the scavengers. They had a certain level of job security, unless they resisted the corporation's exploitation. They could continue scavenging as long as their bodies permitted, and later this task was passed on to their progeny. People of the upper caste abhorred both the job and the scavengers. E. M. Forster in the Preface to *Untouchable* wrote "they have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west" (Forster, Preface vi). Actually, enduring such dehumanizing treatment for thousands of years, the illiterate scavengers cannot think alternatively because their ideas and

perceptions are “the reflection of the thought and expression of the director society” (Freire, *Cultural Action* 1). History testifies that the exploited community always thinks in the manner they are made to think by their exploiters. Therefore, instead of trying to alter their present reality, they live “under the circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 187).

### **Advancement in Sanitation System and Question of Scavengers’ Survival**

The advent of the flush tank and sanitary latrine that had been mentioned in *Untouchable* as a possible solution for the decrease of hatred for the scavengers had reduced their need for manual scavenging. The filthiness associated with the job had also been reduced due to the implementation of modern sewerage and sanitation systems, as well as the adoption of specific measures for cleanliness by city dwellers. When sanitary toilets were introduced in most city houses, the demand for cleaning work increased. In most parts of the cities, the hauling of excreta had stopped. Hence, this once filthy and nasty job of scavenging attracted the people of other religions and upper caste Hindus who abhorred it earlier. As a result, “the pressure on the corporation bosses mounted” (RG 63). From every corner, it has been demanded that “the right to cleaning work could not be reserved exclusively for the Methars” (RG 63).

The crucial part of *Ramgolam* is that it sheds light on that historic moment when, in the face of the repeated demands of the upper caste Hindus and the people of other religions, “the policymakers of the Corporation decided that its garbage cleaning job would be opened to people of all faiths” (RG 63). Since the *Methars* (scavengers) are not allowed to do any job except scavenging, losing their only means of earning will ultimately lead to their extinction. If the works of scavenging are opened for all community people, the scavengers will:

become beggars and will beg in the streets, lanes and bazaars-markets of the city. They will cry-Babu, have been starving for two days; give me a taka to buy bread. The women folk finding no source of survival will sell their bodies. They will become prostitutes in the gentlemen’s locality. Waiting in the semidarkness of Tiger Pass, they will peddle themselves—Not much, just ten taka would be enough. (RG 119)

As these Dalit scavengers are outcasts with no access to any other job except scavenging, the implementation of this policy would threaten their very existence. The destitute condition of the scavengers is like the “Russian serf labour, American

slave labour, Irish agricultural labour, and the metropolitan labour in London trades” (Linebaugh 374). Having no job for survival, the next generation of these scavengers will have no other source of survival except begging from men and prostitution for women. In response to that black law, the *Methars* (scavengers) from all four *Methar* colonies unite to protest against it in a body. Their logic is straight “our ancestors were brought to this country for this work. They lived all their life scavenging shit and piss. No locals, then, wanted this work. Putting up with hatred and nursing pain in our heart we plodded in our duties” (RG 63). They achieved nothing except humiliation and inhuman treatment for their service. In fact, the snatching of their job opportunity will result in their extinction.

It is documented in history that whenever scavengers protested for their rights and raised their voices against injustice, they were brutally subdued and treated inhumanely by the authorities. In fact, in the face of such dehumanizing treatment, the community of the scavengers could never understand their true sense of identity as humans. For thousands of years, these scavengers had been inhumanely exploited in the name of class and caste. Basak writes “[i]n its nearly six thousand years of origin and evolution, Varnasharam\ casteism has shown little loosening of grip” (Basak 63).” Caste is “a disgrace on Hinduism” (qtd. in Agrawal 130), says Mahatma Gandhi. Critiquing the inequality inherent in casteism, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar treated caste as a graded inequality. However, addressing the derivational caste system unique to Indian culture, “most Indian specialists have overlooked the ability of the caste system to change drastically in its form, content, and meaning despite historic changes which take place in the modes of production in South Asia” (Bahl 369-370).

### **Scavengers’ Agency and Conscientization**

Jaladas’s characterization of Gurucharan and Ramgolam engenders a rebellious spirit in the new generation scavengers. Unlike Bakha and Chudalamuttu, Gurucharan, raised his voice against all economic exploitation of the authority of the corporation. As a *Sardar* (leader), Gurucharan always stood by the side of the scavengers. He fought for their rights against the corporation. To raise his voice, he had to tolerate enough physical torture and humiliation. However, Gurucharan never wavered in his support for the scavengers’ sons. For Gurucharan’s valor, the scavengers had unequivocal respect for him. He was always “ready to lay down his life for the rights of the *Harijans* (children of god; a term coined by Gandhi to designate the untouchables)” (RG 7). Gurucharan valiantly protested the corporation’s decision to limit the learning opportunity for the scavengers’ son by

opening admission to the Firingibazar Sevak Colony Government Primary School, which had been reserved specifically for the children of scavengers. His protest against this act was handled with violence. Due to the protest, Gurucharan was brutally beaten by the corporation's agents and thrown into the street to die. Even his complaint to the education officer resulted in more humiliation. Gurucharan and his followers were even threatened with being sacked from their jobs. Thus, the resistance of the scavengers was silenced. Although Gurucharan was courageous, he had no education. Gurucharan's growing age, betrayal by his community members, and the cruelty of the corporation officers made the scavengers more vulnerable to the corporation's conspiracies.

Ramgolam brings forth the critical moment when the head of the city corporation, Abdus Salam, asserted his arrogance in opening the job of scavenging to the people of all classes and creeds. At this crucial time, Ramgolam—a half-educated teenager—kindled new hope among the illiterate scavengers. Ramgolam, throughout his school life, endured untold humiliation and went through severe mental suffering at school before he accomplished his secondary education. More than learning from books, he learned from the dehumanizing conditions of his community. Theoretically, in conscientization, “learning must be closely linked to a liberating praxis based on action and reflection” (Cortina and Winter 11). However, for the deprived and dejected, such as Ramgolam, the bitter experiences of their everyday lives are the source of learning the harsh reality they are exposed to. In fact, the scavenging community doesn't need to be literate in the traditional sense; instead, “they [need to] learn to read situations of injustice to become agents of change [to] insert themselves in the world as capable of subverting a reality that is not favorable to them” (Cortina and Winter 10).

### **Discovering the Socio-religious Hypocrisies of Caste**

Maritza Montero in “Problematization” explains that the process of conscientization begins with “the de-habituation, de-naturalization, and problematization of habits and knowledge that so far were neither questioned, nor even thought about, because they were considered as the way certain things are” (296). Since childhood, Ramgolam was inquisitive. He had weird feelings about his name, which made him inquire his grandfather to know the reason behind his unusual naming Ramgolam—a combination of both a Hindu (Ram) and a Muslim (Golam) name. In reply, his grandfather discloses how, centuries after centuries, the scavengers have endured inhuman treatment as beasts and less than human by the Hindus and the Muslims alike. To keep him safe from the hatred and outrage of the Hindus and the Muslims,

he was named so. The hatred of the Hindus and the Muslims instigated Ramgolam to discover the causes of the destitution of his community. While his study after secondary school (10th grade) was discouraged by his grandfather (Gurucharan), Ramgolam learns that it has been made a rule that “the son of a *Methar* was born to be a *Methar*. The son or the grandson would have to take up the work his forefathers did. There was no respite from the shackles” (RG 68). Whatever higher qualification Ramgolam or any scavenger’s child acquires, they must “haul the Corporation piss and shit, clean the drain or sweep the streets” (RG 68) that is fixed for him. From the day Ramgolam was told that the scavengers are “low-born, like doormats, we are born to live with our head bowed, our life is for being kicked around” (RG 68) a spirit was ignited inside him to discover the causes behind their inescapable suffering.

According to Foucault, a true sense of identity is “not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are ... to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries” (216). To unearth the underlying causes of the plights of the scavengers, Ramgolam explores the four *Methar* colonies to engage in dialogue with the aging generation of his community. His objective was to learn the answer of: who are the *Methar*, where they came from, what their position was in a Bengali society, why they had to clean human waste, why they do not get any job after having education, why people regarded them as untouchable, why their school had been snatched away from them and why the corporation wants to give their job to the people of other community. In the course of these queries, Ramgolam enters the first stage of conscientization, namely thematization. In thematization, an individual, through reflection on social, economic, and political structures, gains awareness of the objective reality that produces social, economic, political, and religious oppression. As evident in Gurucharn’s utterance regarding the social oppression of the scavengers:

We are a very unfortunate race. To the Hindus we are untouchable. We are an unholy race. Not just our touch, even if a Hindu or a Brahmin steps on our shadow, he gets polluted. It is a heinous sin for them. They would be sent to terrifying Hell Rourab, if after threading on our shadows they don’t recite Gayatri mantra (also known as the Savitri mantra dedicated to the Sun deity) for one hundred thousand times and fast for a whole day. Whenever we go, we hear ‘Off, off, shoo, shoo’. For us they nurse shit load of hatred. Following them, the Muslims also hate us; don’t treat us as humans. They treat us as

beasts....they allow dogs near them, but loathe us, shoo us and swear at us all the time. (RG 11)

From the elder members of his community, Ramgolam learns about his ancestry and the religious duplicity of the creation of the *Methars* (scavengers) by the Lord Brahma—who could create the universe but could not cross the human feces lying on the ground without creating the *Methars* (scavengers). In many Hindu scriptures, it is asserted that Brahma, within him, had possessed an ardent desire “quivered to give birth to the untouchable child destined to haul human excreta. Therefore, he created the dirty child from dirt” (RG 30) and allowed others to treat them inhumanely.

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* says, “[w]ithout a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle” (178). Therefore, the rediscovery of their identity as humans involves the development of critical awareness among the scavengers, who, with conscientization, might be encouraged to resist. In his quest to discover himself as a human, Ramgolam unearths the facts that the Brahmins:

...are the manufacturers of this tale. This class is expert in creating division within people; they take delight in endless degradation of mankind. They have great powers in their hands in framing laws. Using the name of religion, they strangulate human reason. The theological rules have such authority that at one stage the society and its members begin to trust the false messages of the priests. Falsehood passing for incontrovertible truth strikes roots in human minds. In order to engage a particular class in dirty work, the priests used religious injunctions as weapons and were successful. The bad logic of religious principles has pushed the *Methars* down to the bottom of Hindu racial hierarchy. (RG 30)

From the speech of Ratan Chakrabarty—an erudite Brahmin scholar and Professor of English—the scavengers came to know that there is no discrimination at the core of the Hindu religion. He points out that all the discriminatory and caste hierarchies are the creation of the Brahmins. Citing examples from *shastra* (religious manual) and *puran* (myths, legends) in a congregational speech, he proved that, regardless of professional differences, all men are equal. From an ethical and religious point of view, Ratan Chakrabarty accentuates his claim, saying:

man is above everything, and there is nothing beyond. As I am a human, so are

you. As a Brahmin, if I am real then as Harijan you are real too. I should tell you one more thing—the division of Brahmin, Khatrio, Shudra is the creation of opportunist humans. I hate and spit at the division into caste. (RG 173)

The acquired knowledge of the duplicity of the upper-caste Brahmins and the man-made reasons behind their depravity made Ramgolam cautious and more polemical in *arguing* for their rights more vehemently. Ramgolam understood that, holistically, there is no need for the superior-inferior dynamics to move the society forward. Hence, he felt the desperate drive inside him to arouse the critical consciousness of the scavengers to resist the authority for their rights and raise their voice against violence perpetrated on them both physically and psychologically.

### **A Dire Need of Reclaiming Identity for Emancipation**

The political language used against the scavengers is the language of violence. This knowledge takes Ramgolam to the codification stage of conscientization, where individuals can critically examine the symbols and language of the oppression. Ramgolam's dialogue with the elder scavengers and the reading of his ancestral history mark the beginning of his conscientization. Montero in "Problematization" writes:

dialogue is problematization's main resource; it is a questioning dialogue, not contentious, but posing questions until there is silence; a silence conducive to the construction of new knowledge, liberated of received but nonexplained responses, revealing contradictions and hidden interests. This leads to a critical consciousness and liberation from unfair and oppressive situations. (891)

Ramgolam's dialogue with the senior members of the community takes him back to the history of the first half of the twentieth century. From them, he learns that before and after India's independence, the scavengers often revolted and called for a strike to demand an increase in their minimum salary. However, the corporation never bowed to their demands and quelled the striking scavengers with iron fists. On August 26, 1940, when the sweepers called for another strike, the corporation adopted a harsh policy of oppression and suppression. The spine of the strike was broken by mass arrest and brutal police torture. The strikes prompted the corporation to adopt more rigorous policies to nullify the demands of the scavengers. After every failed attempt, the corporation adopted more regressive policies to maintain its stronghold on the scavengers. Every attempt of the scavengers to assert their

voice has been silenced by mass arrest, shooting, and aggression.

Ramgolam gets disappointed by this checkered history of the strike of the *Methars* (scavengers), but what surprised him most was “the tale of the broken promises of Jatindramohan and Subash Bose” (*RG* 70). Ramgolam comes to know that the most popular and influential political leaders of that time also turned a deaf ear to the woes and agonies of the scavengers. Chittaranjan Das, although he raised his voice for the rights of Indians against British oppression, was never amicable to the scavengers. Despite numerous pleas and requests, he denied the demand for a two-rupee increase in the salaries of the scavengers. Lacking political support and sympathy from upper-caste people, the scavengers returned empty-handed after every strike. And then

...it was as it had been before. Once again traversing paths breathlessly carrying feces-bins on the head in the mornings, living huddled in one room with members from three generations, kicks and slaps of the bhadrolok and their swearing and cursing. Drinking gallons and gallons of spirit to forget the miseries of life! Then death; then rebirth, followed by death! (*RG* 71)

All this knowledge of his ancestral history and past makes Ramgolam well-versed about the life of the scavengers. Within Ramgolam crystallized deep sympathy for his deprived community. He felt a deep hatred for the dehumanizing caste system.

### **Conscientization and Challenge to Dominant Power Structure**

Freire’s conviction is that “every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’ he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others” (*Pedagogy* 32). Ramgolam realized that these scavengers must develop a critical consciousness, even when marginalized: “they can reject the powerful’s definition of their reality—that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances” (hooks 92). The scavenger community has been “destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things” (Freire, *Pedagogy* 68). Freire suggests, in order to “regain their humanity, they must cease to be things and fight as men and women. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings” (*Pedagogy* 68).

With the fear of losing their jobs and habitat, the scavengers never enraged the corporate authority. And thus, avoided troubles with the corporation authority, which could make their lives more hellish by sacking them from the only means

of their survival. Moreover, it is a frustrating thing that the unity of the Harijans was very fragile. As most male members of the *Methar* (scavengers) colony had alcoholism, they could easily be sold out for drinks. Hence, their opponents often break their unity by tempting them with alcohol or offering a little cash. They may also be betrayers, who, for money, disclose all the secrets of the community. These turncoats always spoil the spirit of resistance. Ramgolam came to realize that their ignorance, credulity, and lethargy were

the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination—and of the paternalism—of which they were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept submerged in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. (Shaull 30)

In the third stage of conscientization, named decodification, individuals deconstruct their own assumptions and critically unveil the world of lies, challenging the dominant narrative and questioning authority to understand the underlying power dynamics. William A. Smith in “Conscientizacao: An Operational Definition” writes:

Consciousness is more than a better understanding of who we are or how we act; it is a process through which individuals who have been exploited and hindered from self-affirmation come to see how they are exploited, how they collude with the exploiters, and how, through critical interaction with the world, they can liberate themselves. (2)

For the scavengers, it is an unavoidable reality that the people in power had always exploited the credulity of the illiterate scavengers. Abdus Salam’s trick of decorating the temple’s wall with tiles divided the scavengers. Being divided by that tricky proposal—given using religious sentiment—the scavengers ignored Ramgolam’s plea not to allow the corporation head to build the slaughterhouse near the colony of the scavengers. The construction of the slaughterhouse beside the scavengers’ abode made their life hellish. The blood that had dried up in the drain caused a hellish foul smell, and “[b]ecause of the stink from the blood and innards of the animals, the air of the Harijan colonies became toxic. The normal life of the Harijan colony of Firingibazar became unquiet, intolerable and distressful” (RG 175). Abdus Salam earlier assured that the slaughterhouse would not affect the scavengers’ living

conditions in their colony. However, discovering the lie and vindictive nature of Abdus Salam, the scavengers all together entrusted their faith in Ramgolam to save their ancestral job from being snatched by the corporation.

In “Cultural Action and Conscientization,” Freire writes “[t]here can be no conscientization without denunciation of unjust structures” (471). At this crisis, for their survival, under Ramgolam’s leadership, the scavengers vowed to stay united and resist the authority to protect their job. They get committed to stopping the appointment of people of other religions to the job of scavenging. They declared in a body that “we won’t let that happen. We won’t share our work with anyone” (RG 63). Their resistance became inevitable to ensure the survival of their generation.

### **Breaking the Culture of Silence**

Freire writes that the oppressed “attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement” (*Pedagogy* 69). With Ramgolam’s instigation among the scavengers aroused “a new awareness of selfhood and [they] begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation” (Shaul 29). It is the action stage of conscientization where the oppressed, using their newly developed critical consciousness, take action to change the structures of oppression that dehumanize them. It is a collective action for liberation because people cannot “liberate themselves alone, because people liberate themselves in communion, mediated by reality which they must transform” (Davis 62). Hence, with solidarity, people challenged the oppressive structure and endeavored to create a more just and equitable society. Ramgolam’s conscientization as a catalyst, thus, gave him the impetus to recreate his identity with a distinct sense of “self-image.” Breaking the “culture of silence,” Ramgolam entrusted in the potential of the oppressed because:

[t]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, *Pedagogy* 32)

To look from a humanist ground, the resistance of the scavengers is justified because at a certain level of oppression, “[t]he rebellious reaction of the working class ... half conscious or conscious—at recovering their status as human beings” (Engels 39- 40) becomes inevitable for survival. Failing to convince Abdus Salam to stop recruiting people of other religions for scavenging work led to a hard line being drawn, with a call for a strike. It continued for four days. Abdus Salam decided not to bow down before the demands of the scavengers. His personal spirit of revenge and ego was assimilated to execute the decision of opening the job of scavenging for all community people. Men and women indiscriminately gathered from every *Methar* colony around the corporation office to resist the recruitment process. It is the day of their life and death. If they fail to stop the recruitment, it will be the total annihilation of their community. They will have no other work to do except begging.

In fact, the betrayal of many scavengers who sold their souls to the powerful class for money never allowed the scavengers to unite and form a strong resistance. Therefore, almost all the resistances of the scavengers were quelled sternly by the people in power. In *Ramgolam*, Jogesh’s betrayal broke the backbone of the scavengers’ resistance. Sharing the secret plan of the scavengers, Jogesh strengthened Abdus Salam, who having known all the plans of Ramgolam, could plot to weaken that resistance. With the sight of the traitor Jogesh, who had been undercover for a long time, the scavengers became agitated and sought to teach him a lesson. Aspirant candidates from upper castes who came to attend the interview for the job of scavenging engaged in a face-to-face conflict with the agitated scavengers. In this chaos, Jogesh’s was killed mysteriously. From the point of situational benefit, it can be assumed that Jogesh was murdered by any of Abdus Salam’s hired men, who took the benefit of the chaos to kill Jogesh without any eyewitnesses. Although the real murderer remained unknown, Abdus Salam, with the help of the police, framed Ramgolam and Kartik in the murder case of Jogesh to spoil the scavengers’ resistance.

After their arrest, the scavengers were able to continue the strike for another four days. However, the cruelty of Abdus Salam compelled the scavengers to resume their job. The absence of Ramgolam and Kartik wrecked the spirit of the scavengers. Sending Ramgolam and Kartik to jail, Abdus Salam initiated the recruitment of people from other castes for scavenging work. Hence, the lives of the scavengers got jeopardized because,

within a month of Jogesh's killing, Abdus Salam appointed sweepers from other communities. Selecting a few from the Harijans, he dismissed them for the crime of agitating. Giving a few Harijan families a hard beating, he had them evicted from the colonies. He also made a law that in the future no one from the Harijans could ever become a Jamader. Moreover, from that point on, Bangladeshis from any community were eligible for a sweeper's job. (RG 190)

Thus, the resistance of Ramgolam and his community was crushed in the face of violence. In court, Ramgolam was punished with fourteen years imprisonment, and Kartik was sentenced to death. Thus, through Kartik's death, another subaltern resistance was silenced in the face of the violence of the people in power.

Jaladas's *Ramgolam* depicts that even the arousal of the scavengers' conscientization could not defeat the conspiracy of the corporation. Kartik, through his death, as claimed by Gayatri Spivak, "subaltern speaks through dying" (The Nation 1) became a voice to inspire the next generation. After the end of his fourteen-year imprisonment, when Ramgolam was released from jail, in every nook and corner of *Methar* colony, he kept searching for another Kartik from the new generation of scavengers. Because, without a Kartik, he will not be able to form another resistance for the scavengers' emancipation. Thakazhi Pillai in *Scavenger's Son*, although paid full attention to Chudalamuttu's struggle and his betrayal to his community, at the end he beckons a glimmer of revolutionary spirit among the new generation of workers. Pillai did not develop the character of Mohan, Pichandi's son and Sundiran's son, who became rebels, to exhibit the anger and strength of the poor. This novel exhibited a revolutionary response from the right-consciousness scavengers. However, it sheds no light on how these scavengers became aware of their rights. Pillai contrasts two generations of scavengers of Alleppey. As he writes,

[t]oday's scavenger knows how much he earns; he has also learnt to get changes for his money without getting cheated. He even has the nerve to want more wages. In Alleppey the new generation scavengers have learnt to speak with united voice. (SS 135)

They maintain a well-organized union and dream of an exploitation-free society. From his childhood memories, as he recalled the deception of the overseers and the corporation chief, in youth Mohan became "living sum total of the power of vengeance of his ancestors that was believed to be suppressed" (SS 137). Setting fire on the new building belonging to the municipal president Mohan takes his

private revenge. At the end of the novel, there is a mention of a huge workers' demonstration where, despite confronting the armed army, the deprived and dejected "half naked and half starving as they were, frightened not just the town, but the whole state" (SS 140). It was the demonstration of the strength of poor men, who, inspired by communist values, were depicted as occupying the streets with a revolutionary spirit, crying out loud, "Long live revolution" (SS 142). With the flag of revolution in hand, "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" (SS 142). By police firing, "comrades had been shot down at three places. Nevertheless, the shot did not succeed in dispersing it. Without a single space and with the line unbroken, the procession moved on" (SS 143) until the last man standing, only to speak "through dying" (Spivak, *The Nation* 1). The sacrifice and fearlessness of the scavengers engender optimism in readers. However, like the other subaltern resistance, these workers were stopped by bullets.

### **Conclusion**

Every such resistance of the scavengers, as depicted in both *Scavenger's Son* and *Ramgolam*, although silenced by force, kindles a dim hope of optimism that, in the coming days, an organized development of conscientization might empower the scavenger community to create a more just and equitable society for their next generation. Moreover, it should be noted that without a positive change in society and government policy, the arousal of conscientization among scavengers and other working classes wouldn't ensure their emancipation. A report published in 2014 by Human Rights Watch titled "Cleaning Human Waste: Manual Scavenging, Caste and Discrimination in India" mentions that the Indian Supreme Court marked the existence of 9.6 million dry latrines, which are still being cleaned manually by the Dalits of the Scheduled Castes. Although the number of manual scavengers is not specific, their destitution and deprivation are evident from the discussion in light of *Scavenger's Son* and *Ramgolam*. To make a society free from exploitation, apart from the oppressed subaltern group, the responsible people from every walk of society must raise their voice together to ensure their rehabilitation and make a society free from caste, class, and economic oppression.

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