



The Pain of the Parayar: An Analysis of K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar*



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Abstract

The purpose of writing this research paper, titled - The Pain of the Parayar: An Analysis of K.A. Gunasekaran's The Scar, is to examine and throw a detailed light on the functioning of the organised institutions of caste, religion and the practice of untouchability in the post-independence India and their influences on the everyday affairs of the 'Parayar' community living in the south Indian villages of Tamil Nadu. The researcher argues that The Scar is not only an account of the regular sufferings of caste oppression of the 'Parayar' as the only Dalit community under the dominant

culture of the established but the entire 'Parayar' population residing in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Pondicherry and the other Dalit communities living across Indian villages, towns, and semi-urban areas in general. It is believed that death removes all differences and viewpoints. However, even today, the psychic Indian notion of caste is so deep-rooted and cruel that it prevents the margins from crossing the public paths and roads located close to the upper caste neighbourhoods.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiography, Memory, Caste, Religion, Community, Untouchability.

Research Paper

A Brief Introduction to Dalit Autobiography

The trend of writing Dalit autobiography first started with the Marathi language in the 1970s. Subsequently, taking inspiration from their predecessors, many other Marathi and Hindi Dalit writers started writing their autobiographies. Since then, Dalit writers have been writing their autobiographies in many regional languages throughout the country, such as Marathi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Odia. They have not only been published in different Indian languages but have also been translated into English and other international languages. The national and international translations and publications of Dalit autobiographies have created a global recognition for Dalit literature as a whole. Some of them have become a part of the syllabus in foreign academia. The language used in Dalit autobiography is typically rustic, raw, and close to the social realities of their childhood to adulthood. It is an influential literary form of social protest through which writers attempt to voice their opinion against the established socio-cultural and religious system and expose the brutality and hypocrisy of the upper castes against the Dalits to the broader readership. Today, it has become a significant genre of Dalit literature. It is not just an account of Dalit life but a literary weapon through which Dalits can claim their socio-economic, political, and religious rights and form their cultural identity along with a sense of dignity and self-respect. It creates a strong public platform for a Dalit writer to speak against the established social order as a whole. It is a creative and blatant literary forum which raises precise experiential facts into a more comprehensive social reality rather than discussing the sense of self-glorification. The writers attempt to recall the past to remember their bygone days and propose a powerful political philosophy, which can be differentiated from the idea of an egalitarian discourse. The prime objective of Dalit autobiography is to awaken and inculcate a spirit of protest among the Dalits against the culture of the established and to create a separate cultural identity for them. It gives willpower to all the exploited people of the country and acts as a source of inspiration to them. It creates a platform through which Dalit writers portray a realistic picture of their lives, such as their painful experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings in the dominant social system of the upper caste sections of Indian society.

About the Author

K.A. Gunasekaran was born in Parayar, a Dalit community, on May 12th, 1955, at Marandai village in the Sivagangai district of Tamil Nadu and died at the age of sixty on January 17th 2016, in Puducherry. He was a professor of performing arts at Pondicherry University and had been the Dean of the School of Performing Arts at the same University. He had also been the Director of the International Institute of Tamil Studies. He was a writer who authored numerous books on drama and folklore and received several literary and dramatic awards in the field of performing arts. He was a Tamil singer and a prominent folk artist, the first Dalit playwright, and an eminent scholar in the fields of drama and folklore. His expertise includes music, dance, music in theatre, media, modern theatre, and Dalit

theatre. He invented the theory of Dalit theatre and scripted and staged the first Dalit play titled '*Bali Adudu*', which emphasises the contemporary social issues of everyday Dalit life prevailing in Tamil Nadu.

About *The Scar*: An Autobiography

The Scar, written by K.A. Gunasekaran, is an autobiographical account of the Dalits living in the villages of Tamil Nadu in the twenty-first-century Indian subcontinent. It was originally written and published in Tamil as *Vadu* (2005), later translated into English as *The Scar* (2009) by V. Kadambari, and published by Orient Black Swan, New Delhi. It has been recognised as a very significant and the first modern Dalit autobiography in Tamil. It records the author's socio-cultural and religious experience as a Dalit up to his graduation. Like other Dalit life writings, it is not only a story of an individual or community but of the entire Dalithood living in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu and across India. The whole narrative of protest or agony has been divided into eight sections. These eight sections are primarily a conversation about Gunasekaran's experiences of caste-based discrimination, untouchability, exploitation, humiliation, reminiscences of childhood difficulties and his unceasing fight against socio-economic disparity. In the Preface, the author describes the duration of his recorded experiences, "I have related my experiences up to my college days in this account. The experiences I have had since the time, my involvement in Marxist movements, my journey down the arts lane, do not figure in this book. Dalit youngsters who read *Vadu* may be inspired to realise that they need to fight this caste-ridden society with more energy than the others do. For the others, this book is an introduction to Dalit life." (Preface, viii).

Caste System and the Indian Villages

Caste is a fundamental component of Hinduism, and thus, every Hindu has a caste identity. It is an extreme form of social stratification based not only on the division of labour but also on labourers. To observe and study an accurate picture of Indian socio-cultural and religious life, one must visit villages. The foundational structures of villages are purely based on caste hierarchies. The masses residing in villages are highly caste-conscious and concerned about their caste-based identity, and their life has no meaning without caste. In the villages, even today, the upper caste people do not allow the lower caste people to take horse-riding marriage processions and use common burial grounds or crematoriums. Indian villages are known as the epicentres of caste-based oppression and the practice of untouchability against Dalits. The cognitive notion of caste interferes in all the matters of everyday village life. Despite being legally abolished, the practice of untouchability is very constant in rural areas. It is extremely insensitive towards Dalits that it treats them even worse than animals. Animals can enter the upper caste houses; they can touch their utensils, and they can enter inside their temples, but the Dalits cannot do so. Even the shadow of a Dalit can pollute the upper castes.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is the first ever scholar in Indian history who, in terms of interpreting the notion of caste, not only theorised and explained it but also gave enormous suggestions and opinions to root out an idea of caste and constitutional abolishment of the inhuman practice of untouchability from the very heart of the Indian psyche. Dr Ambedkar

not only theorised the annihilation of caste and statutory abolishment of untouchability but also rejected an ideal representation of the Indian village: a central point of caste oppression and untouchability, presented by Sir Charles Metcalfe, a British civil servant of the East India Company, and gave an accurate depiction of the Indian village life through his writings and speeches.

Valerian Rodrigues, a former Professor of Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in the sub-section 'Outside the Fold' of his edited volume on "The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar," published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in 2002, quotes Dr Ambedkar's understandings about the Indian village, its structure and the images of the Touchables and the Untouchables in response to Metcalfe views on the Indian village,

"Since many foreigners are led to accept this idealistic view of the Indian village, it would be better to present a realistic picture of society as one finds it in an Indian village. The Indian village is not a single social unit. It consists of castes. But for our purposes, it is enough to say: 1. The population in the village is divided into two sections - (i) Touchables and (ii) Untouchables. 2. The Touchables form the major community and the Untouchables a minor community. 3. The Touchables live inside the village and the Untouchables live outside the village in separate quarters. 4. Economically, the Touchables form a strong and powerful community, while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community. 5. Socially, the Touchables occupy the position of a ruling race, while the Untouchables occupy the position of a subject race of hereditary bondsmen. What are the terms of associated life on which the Touchables and the Untouchables live in an Indian village? In every village, the Touchables have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow. This code lays down the acts of omissions and commissions which the Touchables treat as offences." (Rodrigues, 2002, 325). Dr Ambedkar opined that it is not only the Dalits who are affected by caste but all other communities in the hierarchical social order are affected. He further argues, "Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organisation to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world. It is claimed to be a special contribution to the theory of social organisation for which India may well be proud of." (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol. 5, 19).

The Scar and the Pain of the Parayar

According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the literal meaning of the word *Scar* refers to "a mark left on the part of the body after an injury, such as a cut, has healed." The author, K.A. Gunasekaran, firmly believes that the mark of the wound left after an injury on the part of the human body may recover after a due course of time, but the psychological wounds of constant caste oppression and untouchability practised by the upper caste people against the Parayar / Dalits in the rural locations of Tamil Nadu and across India will remain forever. Mr Mohammad Tariq, an Assistant Professor of English at Integral University Lucknow, in his research paper - *Bhasha and Dalit Literature: A Critical*

Exploration of K.A. Gunasekaran's The Scar in Bishun Kumar and Neha Arora edited volume - *The Major Voices in New Literatures in English*, published by Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd, New Delhi, in 2016, explains the literary interpretation of *The Scar* and its essence,

“The Literary connotation of the word *Scar* is a mark that is left on the skin after a wound has healed. The word also denotes a permanent wound in his heart or a mark of eternal pain that a person is left with after an unpleasant experience. It is also suggestive of something unpleasant and ugly that spoils the actual and natural image of something. Gunasekaran’s multiple scars are portrayed clearly and skilfully in his autobiography. It seems to be a story which is almost every other Dalit’s story. Growing up as a boy, from the ‘Parayar’ caste, in the milieu of Hindu, Christian and Muslim communities, Gunasekaran has narrated the familiar face of caste oppression in the villages of Tamil Nadu. As the narration unfolds, the reader is shown how the low caste people negotiate differently with the other religious communities. *The Scar* is a projection of the deep pain of Parayar’s sufferings, through numerous anecdotes, that come from the grievously unjust practices of upper castes. The autobiography vehemently emphasises the fact that the Indian villages are totally caste conscious; and for that, according to Gunasekaran, Dalit emancipation rests on better education for the community.” (Mohammad, 2016, 104).

What is the language of *The Scar*, an autobiography? Is it different from the other Dalit autobiographies or the same? Does it induce a sense of pity and anger among the readers? Ravikumar, in his original Tamil translation of the Introduction to the autobiography, gives satisfactory answers to these questions, “Gunasekaran’s language touches the depth of one’s heart without in the least evoking pity. We do not see in Gunasekaran’s language the anger of the language of Namdev Dhasal, who wished ‘to copulate with hunger.’ Nevertheless, his language instils that anger in the readers.” (Ravikumar, Introduction, xiii).

The Scar is based on the everyday lived experiences of caste oppression and the practice of untouchability of the writer up to his college days. There is no exaggeration in it in terms of the representation of the everyday social realities of the Dalits. The writer does not portray himself or claim to be the hero of the story. Instead, he becomes the voice of the community to which he belongs. Therefore, it is enough to say that it is not only a time-bound daily life account of the writer alone but of the whole community. At the outset of his autobiography, Gunasekaran makes the readers aware of the practice of untouchability existing in the villages of Tamil Nadu; because of their untouchable identity, Dalits have no access to enter inside the Siva temple of Elayankudi, the place where his father settled for his career as a teacher and he started his schooling. The writer writes, “The Siva temple in Elayankudi laid in that part of the city where the Arya Vysyas lived in large numbers. I have never been inside this temple even today. But I have often touched the four stone figure of Ammanavayan, sitting cross-legged in front of this temple.” (Gunasekaran, 2012, 1).

The Scar, an autobiography, makes the readers aware of the fact that the villages of Tamil Nadu, like the other villages in the country, are home to the existing burning issue of caste

oppression due to its extreme social stratification. Gunasekaran narrated many recurring complaints of harassment, humiliation, and other injustices inflicted upon the Dalits during the early childhood days he spent in Elayankudi and its surrounding villages. The author recalls one of his school days experiences in Elayankudi, where he studied from class six to eight. There was a clerk in the school. One day, he entered the classroom with a list of the scheduled caste students in his hand while the classes were on, but he was not minded by the teachers, and thus he spoke to the class: “How many in this class are Parayars?” He would ask. ‘Put up your hands! Stand up, I will count. Look, all of you should come to the office after class to pick up your scholarship forms which should be filled up within a week’s time and returned to the office.’ Even now, it hurts to think about those times when we had to stand up in front of the others in the class, shrinking and cringing. They would reinforce caste identities by labelling us Pallars, Parayars and Chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was.” (Gunasekaran, 2012, 5).

After getting out of the public humiliation of receiving the government scholarship form meant for the scheduled caste students from the clerk’s office in the school, Gunasekaran faces another major problem of getting the scholarship form signed by the village headman and the local revenue officer. He makes several rounds to meet the village headman and the revenue officer to get his scholarship form signed, but he fails to meet them every time. The author describes his further ordeal, “It was difficult to even see them. If they saw us in the village, they would ask us to tie up their cattle, dig out a canal, etc., and only then would they sign the forms. Father would feel frustrated every time he had to approach them for their signatures. ‘It’s horrid, the way they displayed their caste superiority before they sign anything’, he would say.” (Gunasekaran, 2012, 9).

Poverty and hunger had been the persistent problems in the family of Gunasekaran. Being a large family of eleven members - four brothers, four sisters, two wives and himself it was really difficult for his father, despite being a school teacher, to fulfil all the economic needs of his family members. To reduce the financial burden on his father, during the quarterly and half-yearly school leave, Gunasekaran used to accompany his elder brother to fishing in the nearby ponds and rivers. His mother used to work at the Green Talkies as a ticket seller for Muslim women. Meanwhile, the local Muslim religious council decided that their women should not go to the cinema, and eventually, she lost her job. During Ramzan, after school hours, he would quickly come home and leave his school bag at home, and then he would rush to the mosque with a bowl in his hand. He further writes, “I would have the porridge given at the mosque, wash the bowl and get some more to be taken home. Many nights we would have no food at home. The porridge given at the mosque would serve as our dinner...During summer holidays, there would be no water in the ponds. Unable to fish, I would sell mangoes. The commission money given by the shop owner would be given to mother to buy rice. Mother, for her part, would cut the thorn trees for firewood, sell it to the Muslim neighbours and use the money to feed us...During the monsoon months, she would cut grass and sell it to the Muslim houses. Most mornings, we would only have soaked tamarind seeds for breakfast.” (Gunasekaran, 2012, 8-10).

During his early college days, Gunasekaran had established himself as a famous folk singer and lyricist and formed his own musical band consisting of his Christian and Muslim friends. He would participate in most of the religious celebrations of Christians and Muslims. Though he had never been to any church or mosque as a devotee, but he never told his friends about his real caste identity. Rather, he would introduce himself as a Christian whenever somebody asked him about his caste. Because his parents had told him that he should introduce himself as a Christian. Being born as untouchables, his parents, unlike some of their fellow Parayars, neither converted to Christianity nor Islam. However, they had a belief that the Christians were less caste-minded than the upper-caste Hindus. That is why they had told their children to introduce themselves as Christians if they were asked about their caste by anybody.

According to the author, the psychic notion of caste and untouchability was so deep-rooted in the villages of Tamil Nadu. Despite introducing himself as a fake Christian by hiding his real caste identity, Gunasekaran and his family members, in whichever village they went to except Elayankudi and Slaiyur, the ghost of their caste kept on haunting them. During the quarterly, half-yearly and yearly holidays, the author and his elder brother would go to their maternal aunt's house. They had to cross several other villages before reaching their destination. On reaching their destination, he realised that, like upper-caste Hindus, the Muslims also believed in caste-based humiliation and untouchability. He further writes, "I asked my brother Karunanidhi, 'Why is it that the Muslims in this village alone ask us about our caste and then make us drink water with our cupped hands?' He said, 'The Muslims here are surrounded by many other castes like Saanar, Konar, etc. They must have learnt from them. That is why these people are also aware of caste.' While walking down the road, we would see sugarcane fields on either side. Feeling thirsty we would crouch near the Thovoor canal and drink the water by scouring it with both hands. We would be very, very careful about not disturbing the water. Otherwise the water would become muddy and smelly. We did not know to which caste this canal belonged. 'If it belongs to the upper caste, we would be tied to a tree and beaten up... Even sedately running water would intimidate us, in the name of caste, in the villages surrounding Elayankudi.'" (Gunasekaran, 2012, 20-21).

The author supports the idea of inter-caste marriages within Dalit communities and between Dalits and non-Dalits. He also makes the readers aware about the severe consequences of post-intercaste marriages caused by caste-obsessedness existing in the villages of Tamil Nadu in particular and across India in general. He firmly believes that such outcomes are inevitable because the upper-caste people living in the villages want to defend their caste-mindedness. He advises that the Dalits must never compromise with hard work to get a better education in order to bring individual and societal transformation.

Conclusion

Gunasekaran's autobiography, *The Scar*, is undoubtedly a living social documentation of the Parayar community of Tamil Nadu. Through his lived experiences, he makes sincere efforts to reveal the cruelties of the upper castes against the Parayar. He attempts to destabilise the established and organised institutions of caste, religion, and untouchability, which encourage the upper castes to commit countless atrocities of caste and religion-based oppression, mental

and physical exploitation, and the practice of social exclusion against the Dalit communities. The researcher has thoroughly examined the book and concludes that it is not only an account of an individual's hardships or testimony of the community like many other Dalit life narratives but has created a significant challenge to the mainstream Indian literature, which has always been silent about the agonies of the Dalits and refused to give any respectful space in their writings. The author strongly believes that Dalit assertion and their emancipation from age-old upper-caste oppression, exploitation, humiliation, socio-economic inequality, and the practice of untouchability are possible only through better education in the community and constant voices against the established forces.

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