
Dalit Emancipation and Caste Consciousness in Gunasekaran's *The Scar*

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Abstract: Gunasekaran's *The Scar* highlights how cruel and caste-conscious Indian villages are, and how improving community education is the key to achieving Dalit independence. In order to depict innocence, harshness, and drama of a South Indian village, Gunasekaran writes in a simple and informal way. *The Scar*, regarded as the first contemporary Dalit autobiography in Tamil, is a significant work advocating for the assertion and emancipation of Dalits. K.A. Gunasekaran tells the well-known story of caste discrimination and prejudice that was common in Tamil Nadu villages as a youngster from the Parayar caste growing up in the midst of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim populations. We see how the "low" caste bargains with the three religious sects in different ways as the story progresses. The ridiculous anecdotes that make fun of the egregiously unfair behaviours of the "higher" castes allow the Paraya to express their genuine suffering. The present research paper tries out how Dalits are dehumanized and neglected and how caste played a dominant role in the lives of human beings.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, caste consciousness, caste bias

Introduction: Dalits have suffered politically and economically irrespective of caste, race, and region. Dalit memoirs have a significant role in the literary world since Dalit works are about their suffering and plight. These typically provide insights into social injustice that have plagued the underprivileged. The important Dalit autobiographies are the works of Bama, Baby Kamble, Narendra Jadhav, Sharankumar Limbale, Vasant Moone, Om Prakash Valmiki, Laxman Mane, K.A. Gunasekaran. The majority of the works were originally written in regional languages and afterwards translated into numerous languages, including English. Dalit literature now has a unique place in literature all around the world thanks to these translations. Autobiographical sketches typically appeal to readers and literary reviewers because they offer realism in their themes. Anderson accurately says: "The explanation for the special appeal of autobiography is fascinating with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries. Writers of memories and life stories never lack an audience. Autobiography is a way to organize the story of a life and reflects on the past in order to better understand the present" (6-7). Ambedkar begins his description of six painful events from his early life and upbringing with lines that, in today's context, serve as a suitable beginning to the genre of Dalit autobiography.

Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realize how oppressive it is in its actuality. It is difficult for them to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village consisting of a large number of Hindus; go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and sundry; collect food at the doors of the Hindus; buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance; regard the village in every way as their home—and yet never touch or be touched by any one belonging to the village.

The problem is how best to give an idea of the way the untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus. A general description or a record of cases of the treatment accorded to them are the two methods by which this purpose could be achieved. I have felt that the latter would be more effective than the former. In choosing these illustrations I have drawn partly upon my experience and partly upon the experience of others. I begin with events that have happened to me in my own life. (661)

Queen marks: “For *Dalit Sahitya* or Dalit literature purports to be a different kind of writing, not to be judged by standards of stylistic originality, beauty, or entertainment, but by its authenticity and truthfulness to the physical, social, psychological and spiritual realities of its narrators and their communities, and to the commitment to a radical vision of social transformation these authors share with one another across caste, class, gender, linguistic and geographic boundaries. I have pored over, marked the pages, and returned to re-read a dozen of these works.” (283) Of course, there are many non-Dalit works on Dalits that offer a fantastic auto-sketch. Comparing the works of Dalits and non-Dalits, Jadhav (2003) rightly remarks: “The difference is that between the love of a mother and love of a nurse” (iv).

It is clear that the majority of Dalit writers’ writings discuss the treatment of disadvantaged classes with contempt. The Tamil autobiographical novel *Vadu* by K.A. Gunasekaran serves as the basis for this essay’s attempt to analyze the problems and hardships faced by Dalits in Hindu culture. V. Kadambari translated it as *The Scar* for the English language. Gunasekaran tells the well-known story of caste discrimination and pervasive prejudice in the three communities’ Tamil Nadu villages. The Dalit Parayar group in Tamilnadu’s Ramachandrapuram district is depicted through the novel’s folklore, rituals, cultures, and festivals. Additionally, it talks of their hardships, exploitation, tyranny, deprivation, and poverty by non-tribal or non-Dalit people. It also makes an effort to highlight many societal injustices and the ensuing difficulties faced by the Dalits depicted in Gunasekaran’s *The Scar*.

The book is a critique of Hindu tradition and upper caste society. It illustrates the appalling realities of caste discrimination in public spaces like playgrounds and schools. It explains how the Parayar caste faced numerous challenges in their caste-based society. The book details Gunasekaran’s life in college education. He, in the preface to *The Scar*, asserts: 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...For others, this book is an introduction to Dalit life...I wrote about discrimination practices that I had suffered; sometimes tears flowed. (ii).

A Dalit tribe from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka is known as the Parayar. They have historically worked as farmers and weavers. Most of them are struggling financially. The word “scar” refers to a mark that remains on the skin after a wound has healed, and it is used in the novel “The Scar” to symbolize the lingering sadness and ongoing pain that come with negative events. It suggests that the society and upper caste wealthy people have left certain wounds on the life of all Dalits.

The events in Gunasekaran’s life are depicted in detail. If a non-Dalit young child can bluntly approach any elderly Dalit person in the singular, all Dalits should wish higher caste people and they should be prepared to receive. “Within the hamlet, we had to use the terms “Ayya” and “Sami” to refer to members of the upper caste. The women were referred to as ‘Nachiyar’ or ‘Aachi’. One had to call even those who were younger in age only thus. No one can call the upper caste boys or girls by their names” (42). The writer wanted to demonstrate how Dalits themselves lost their sense of dignity in the face of inhuman bodies. Ambedkar (1945) says: “Educate, Organize and Agitate, inspired the *Dalits* and they lent him unremitting support. The most vital part was that Dr. Ambedkar engendered among the *Dalits* a sense of self-respect and self-confidence” (54). Because their lands were cleverly and cognitively taken over by upper caste people by tricking Dalits, the majority of Dalits are extremely destitute and lack any fields for cultivation to produce some grains. The father of Gunasekaran is a teacher and has two marriages. Three of his six kids are boys and three are girls. His income is insufficient to provide for his huge family. They don’t have any agricultural fields.

The mother of Gunasekaran works at a movie theater’s ticket counter and occasionally gathers wood or cow dung to sell to help feed her family. Along with his father, Gunasekaran occasionally works odd tasks such as collecting cow manure, setting up a shop at his school, and cutting bricks during the summer. He had gained a lot of knowledge through odd jobs, especially the value of education, but his naive mind had not yet realized that Dalits would face discrimination everywhere, including in educational institutions. He says that Parayar students are discriminated in schools and colleges. The cross-eyed school clerk asks in class:

How many in this class are Parayars?’ he would ask. Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? 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. . . .They would reinforce caste identities by labelling us Pallar, Parayars and Chakiliyars. (5)

This question boggles the wits of the schoolchildren. They begin to reflect on the caste system they experienced as children. Teachers in his school discriminate low caste people. Children are taught in schools that members of the upper caste are distinct from those of the lower caste, and upper caste students are encouraged to keep all Dalits under their feet from an early age so that they are kept out of both the classroom and society as a whole.

The scholarship application may be given to the applicant after reviewing their academic record or may be mailed to their residence. This practice is not followed by the casteist school clerk, who instead approaches the class and belittles them by asking, "How many Parayars?" In all aspects of Indian society, including birth, death, and marriage ceremonies, caste is determined, but Dalits are inevitably the victims of this malpractice.

Because they are Dalits, writers like Limbale and Siddalingaiah experience humiliation from their teachers in their schools. Gunasekaran was identified as a Dalit since he is unable to read Sanskrit and receive mantra like Brahmins who are well-versed when he went to seek the Headman's signature on his scholarship application. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *The Untouchable: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, explains *Dalit* in details as follows:

Dalit is one who denied the supremacy or *Brahmins* and did not receive the *mantra* from *Brahmins* or other recognized Hindu *gurus*. He has denied the authority or *Vedas* and did not worship the Hindu God and Goddess. He was not served to good Brahmins as family priests and had no Brahmin priests at all. He was denied the access to the interior of or the Hindu temples. (22).

Gunasekaran observed that a Parayar should maintain a distance of eight feet whenever speaking, moving, or standing with members of the upper caste, such as Konar, etc. He found a lot of cruel therapies for him. He once reprimanded a youngster for hacking at the flower-filled tree's branches. He asks him, "Dei! Why are you cutting away the flowers and the tender fruits of our tree?" (51) He slapped him as soon as he finished speaking. The other members of the higher caste yell: "Do you know to whom you have addressed 'Dei'? We will cut your tongue. Are you aware of the difference of your caste and ours?...Be careful before you speak. Otherwise we would make you scarce" (51).

It was forbidden for Parayaras to enter temples and Brahmin streets. They were instructed to lodge somewhere beyond the village. Any Dalit who enters or travels through the Brahmin streets faces significant attacks. Upper caste individuals state: "Don't you know that this road goes to upper caste street? Don't keep talking unnecessarily. Take a different route and reach home safely" (55).

Gunasekaran's thoughts underwent a profound alteration as a result of this encounter. Once, while he was leaving a grocery store, he moved aside to make room for the person in front of him, but the enraged man slapped Gunasekaran in the cheek. He began to scream:

Look at the cheek of the Paraya boy! The man spat out, and then went on his way. It took me five minutes to come out of my state of shock. I put the box down and sat on the bund crying...I started walking back home. I had too many questions with myself. 'Why did that man beat me? What mistake did I do? Why did he call me a Paraya?' I didn't get any answer...The moment she heard the entire story he said, 'See we belong to a Paraya household, and they are Maravars. When men and women of high caste come, we need to stand at least eight feet away from them. We ought to step aside to give them way. That is why the man has beaten you. (43)

In *The Scar*, Gunasekaran tells how he and wealthy Muslim residents of Ramanathapuram district's Elayankudi live side by side. Gunasekaran was regarded by the entire Muslim community since he was a teacher's son, and he was granted special access to their homes and mosques. He is happy to discuss his interactions with Muslims in the area. He paints a fairly favourable picture of Muslim life in Elanyankundi, where he was unaware that caste distinctions existed. Gunasekaran has this to say:

The Elayankudi Muslims are very loving towards me. They ask us to eat with them when they have celebrations in their houses. I address them as Kaka, Mamu and Mammi, like they were my own relatives. Caste was never a barrier. And never did they, even after they knowing our caste discriminate us. Whereas in my birthplace, Marandai, the relationship between living beings is fractured by caste. (53)

In Elanyankudi, Muslims never treat him differently since he is a member of the Dalit community. They had a friendly relationship with him and were very amiable. They never forbid him from entering the Masjid, the Dargah, or their home. In addition, they offer him sugar, dates, and porridge during Ramadan to help his family avoid going hungry after the *fatiha* is recited during the celebration in the *dargah*. To pay for his children's education, his father used to solicit financial assistance from Muslim households. His father would enlist the aid of wealthy members of the Muslim community, or Jamaat, each year as soon as classes resumed. He received assistance from his friends and the Jamaat in paying his tuition. His muslim 'neighbours' children used to call her mother *Chachi* and *Mami*. The kind of reciprocal relationship he has with muslims make him think of "islam as a great religion". (44)

The primary goal of Dalits is to combat inequality. They battle for identity. Typically, all Dalits are publicly questioned about their caste. Dalits keep quiet in front of individuals from higher castes out of fear. They are also mistreated by outsiders. Dalits should proudly identify themselves as such. They will always face discrimination if they remain silent in society and are hesitant to reveal who they are. Why would it be wrong for them to mention their caste?

Silence from Dalits increases marginalization by the wealthy and powerful people. Dalits are to blame for it. It needs to be taken seriously. Even famous Dalit authors avoided disclosing their caste. Dalits should do the same as upper caste members who identify with their names. People are ashamed to admit they are from a low caste, so it is obvious that they do not believe education will improve their lot in life.

Like the other Dalit writers such as Bama and Laxman Gaikwad, Gunasekaran also says that education is the only force and it helps the oppressed people to emancipate from poverty and caste discrimination but at schools and colleges, Dalits are kept aside while school students are playing and singings songs. In spite of singing good, Gunasekaran was neglected by the selection committee because of caste discrimination.

Traditional arranged marriages are still practiced in the Parayar and Chakliyar communities. The elders do not approve of love weddings or inter-caste unions. If somebody marries someone they love, that person has been abandoned by their caste. The majority of Dalits wish to convert to Christianity and Buddhism since they are subjected to oppression by Hindu castes. Due to caste oppression, Gunasekaran intends to convert to Islam, as he states in the preface, "I have experienced harassment in the name of caste and have often thought about converting to Islam" (4) and finally he converted into Islam. Illiterates, Dalits and marginalized people can't escape humiliation from any religion. For instance, the Tamil Dalit woman writer Bama suffered in Christianity; Gunasekaran was discriminated under Islam community. It shows that Islam is also polluted by the interference of Hinduism as they learn all these by neighbouring people. Gunasekaran reminds: "There were fifty Muslim families and a mosque in Karunchutti. Even if we asked a Muslim household for water, they too would ask us, 'Who are you?' before they offered us water" (20). He advocates for the assertion and emancipation of Dalits by influencing the lives of Dalits in the current day in this way. His method of narrating with a thematic focus is an attack on the Indian orthodox group. His goal in writing *The Scar* is to show Dalit youths who are discouraged and dejected that it is possible to escape the constraints of the caste system. By being persistent and working hard, one can succeed and build a reputation without becoming upset or angry. Furthermore, Gunasekaran's voice speaks for all those who are depressed, marginalized, threatened, underprivileged, and deprived because they belong to a particular sector, religious group, gender, or linguistic group. As a result, the message of this autobiography is not limited to the Dalits alone.

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