
Education as Emancipation and Oppression: A Critical Study of Caste, Resistance, and Identity in K.A. Gunasekaran's "*The Scar*"

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Abstract

The present paper critically examines the significance of education in *The Scar (Chottu)* by K.A. Gunasekaran, a deeply personal and politically charged autobiographical narrative that portrays the childhood experiences of a Dalit boy in rural Tamil Nadu. Set against the backdrop of rigid caste hierarchies, the text offers a poignant depiction of how educational spaces, which are ideally meant to be sites of learning and empowerment, often mirror and reinforce the deeply ingrained inequalities of Indian society. The study explores how education in the text emerges as both a transformative force and a domain fraught with systemic exclusion, humiliation, and caste-based discrimination. Gunasekaran's journey through school reveals the multiple challenges faced by Dalit students—ranging from social ostracization and biased treatment by teachers to physical segregation within classrooms. Yet, education also becomes a space of resistance and self-assertion, allowing the protagonist to develop a sense of identity, dignity, and political consciousness. Through close literary analysis and engagement with key works in Dalit studies and educational discourse, this paper argues that *The Scar* illustrates the dual nature of education: as a potential tool for social liberation and as a mirror reflecting the persistence of caste oppression within institutional frameworks.

Keywords: Education, Dalit literature, caste discrimination, resistance, emancipation, autobiographical narrative, K.A. Gunasekaran, *The Scar*

1. Introduction

K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (originally published in Tamil as *Chottu*) presents a critical autobiographical account of Dalit childhood in rural Tamil Nadu, offering a rich primary text

for the study of caste, education, and resistance. Through its depiction of entrenched caste hierarchies and the everyday violence experienced by Dalit communities, the narrative foregrounds education as a central axis of both oppression and emancipation. This paper situates *The Scar* within the broader discourse of Dalit literature and critical pedagogy, examining how education functions not merely as a developmental tool but as a contested site of ideological struggle. The narrative illustrates how formal schooling—while representing the possibility of upward mobility—also reproduces systemic inequities through caste-based exclusion, social stigmatization, and institutional neglect. By conducting a close textual analysis supported by relevant theoretical frameworks from Dalit studies, sociology of education, and postcolonial literary criticism, this study interrogates the ambivalent role of education in the text. It argues that *The Scar* not only critiques the structural limitations of India's educational institutions but also reclaims education as a space for asserting Dalit identity, dignity, and agency. In doing so, the text contributes meaningfully to the discourse on education as both a site of subjugation and a mechanism for transformative resistance.

2. Survey of Literature

A significant body of scholarship has critically examined the intersection of caste and education in India, emphasizing how structural inequities continue to impede Dalit access to educational opportunities. Foremost among these voices is B.R. Ambedkar, who articulated education as a vital instrument for social mobility, individual dignity, and collective empowerment. He asserted that “education is the milk of a lioness; he who drinks it will roar,” underscoring its revolutionary potential for Dalits (Ambedkar). Gail Omvedt extends this argument by situating Dalit exclusion from the knowledge economy within a broader historical framework, advocating for educational justice as an essential component of democratic reform (Omvedt). Similarly, Kancha Ilaiah critiques the Brahmanical dominance of educational spaces and calls for epistemic diversity rooted in subaltern knowledge systems (Ilaiah). Gopal Guru highlights how institutional spaces often mask caste-based discrimination through a veneer of meritocracy and neutrality, reinforcing systemic inequality (Guru).

In parallel,

Dalit literature functions as both social documentation and political critique. Autobiographical works such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Bama's *Karukku* reveal how education, while offering a glimmer of social mobility, frequently becomes a terrain of humiliation and exclusion. These narratives present education as both aspirational and deeply fraught, reflecting the contradictions embedded in caste-bound societies (Valmiki; Kamble; Bama). Within Tamil Dalit literature,

Gunasekaran's *The Scar* distinguishes itself through its vivid portrayal of a child's early educational experiences in a caste-segregated rural context. Scholars such as Raj Kumar and M. Mukundan observe that Dalit autobiographies, including *The Scar*, challenge the idealization of education by exposing the casteist structures and psychological violence embedded in schooling (Kumar; Mukundan). As such, these texts frame education as a contested site where the desire for self-betterment collides with the entrenched realities of caste-based exclusion.

3. Education as a Liberating Force

Gunasekaran's narrative underscores the transformative potential of education. Despite being born into a community systematically excluded from formal learning, the protagonist's pursuit of education becomes an act of defiance. It challenges both the immediate social order and the larger cultural scripts that normalize caste discrimination. Education, in this narrative, is not merely a route to literacy or employment—it is a symbolic and material act of reclaiming dignity.

The protagonist's early encounters with books and formal learning inspire a sense of agency. He views schooling as a pathway to knowledge that has long been denied to his community. His struggle to attend school, obtain textbooks, and find study time amidst familial responsibilities speaks to the aspirational role that education plays. The text portrays education as a key to unlocking both personal and collective aspirations, symbolizing a break from historical marginalization. Through his determination to study despite social ridicule and economic hardship, the protagonist embodies Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, and organize." Education thus becomes a radical act, one that threatens the very foundations of caste-based segregation.

4. The Classroom as a Site of Discrimination

Despite its liberating potential, education in *The Scar* is fraught with systemic discrimination. Gunasekaran's descriptions of classroom experiences are filled with instances of humiliation and exclusion. He is made to sit at the back of the classroom, often physically separated from his upper-caste peers. Teachers either ignore him or treat him with disdain, reinforcing the notion that he does not belong in that space.

This discrimination is not incidental but structural, reflecting a broader pattern of caste-based exclusion in Indian educational institutions. The protagonist's alienation within the classroom represents the internal contradictions of a system that promises equality but enacts hierarchy. These experiences highlight a paradox: while education holds the promise of equality, it often reproduces caste hierarchies within its very structure. The educational system, as portrayed in the text, becomes a mirror of the larger social system, where caste bias

and exclusion are normalized. This duality adds a complex layer to the narrative, reminding readers that institutional reform is necessary for education to truly serve as a means of social justice. The portrayal of the classroom as a space of both aspiration and exclusion invites critical reflection on the structural barriers that undermine inclusive education.

5. Role of Family and Community Support

Another vital aspect of the narrative is the role of family and community in sustaining the protagonist's educational journey. Gunasekaran's parents, though themselves uneducated, understand the value of schooling and encourage their son's academic pursuits. Their support, both emotional and financial, is portrayed as a crucial factor in his perseverance. The sacrifices made by the family—often foregoing basic necessities to buy books or pay school fees—underscore the communal investment in education. The narrative shows how marginalized communities, despite being deprived of resources, place immense value on education as a means of collective upliftment. The solidarity of the community, their belief in education as a redemptive force, emerges as a counter-narrative to the apathy and hostility of the dominant social order. Gunasekaran's experience echoes those found in other Dalit narratives, where the family often emerges as the bedrock of support. This depiction challenges the myth of cultural apathy among Dalits and emphasizes their active engagement with education as a strategy of empowerment.

6. Education and Identity Formation

As the protagonist grows and advances in his education, he begins to develop a critical consciousness about his identity and social position. The ability to read and write allows him to understand the historical and political dimensions of caste oppression. Education enables him to articulate his experiences and question the status quo.

This cognitive transformation is a crucial aspect of the narrative. It reveals how education, beyond its functional role, contributes to the formation of a politicized Dalit identity. By learning about figures like Ambedkar and engaging with Dalit literature and history, the protagonist comes to see himself not as a victim but as part of a larger struggle for justice. His educational journey thus becomes not just personal advancement but a political awakening. Through education, he transitions from internalized inferiority to collective resistance, embodying the Dalit movement's larger ethos.

7. Writing as an Extension of Education

The Scar itself can be seen as a continuation of Gunasekaran's educational journey. By documenting his life story, he transforms personal memory into public testimony. Writing becomes a political act, a way to claim space in a literary and social landscape that has historically silenced Dalit voices. The act of writing serves multiple purposes—it educates readers about the realities of caste, provides a platform for marginalized experiences, and

asserts the intellectual and creative capabilities of Dalits. Thus, Gunasekaran's authorship challenges the notion that education and literary production are the sole domains of the privileged. Moreover, writing becomes a tool of counter-memory, allowing Gunasekaran to reclaim narratives that have been distorted or erased by dominant historiography. His work contributes to a growing body of Dalit literature that asserts the validity and power of lived experience.

8. Comparative Reflections

When viewed alongside other Dalit narratives like *Karukku* by Bama and *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *The Scar* offers a unique perspective on the intersection of education and caste. While each of these texts presents a different cultural and regional context, they all converge on the idea that education is both a weapon and a battlefield. The recurring motif of humiliation in educational spaces, the perseverance of marginalized students, and the role of family support are common threads that bind these narratives together. Bama's struggle against patriarchal and casteist norms in *Karukku* and Valmiki's depiction of exclusion in *Joothan* mirror Gunasekaran's experiences, reinforcing the systemic nature of caste oppression. Gunasekaran's work contributes to this broader discourse by emphasizing the significance of early education and the foundational role it plays in shaping identity and resistance. His emphasis on childhood experiences brings attention to how caste-based discrimination is internalized from an early age, shaping the trajectory of one's life and learning.

9. Challenges and Possibilities

The challenges faced by Gunasekaran are not isolated incidents but reflections of systemic issues. The persistence of caste discrimination in Indian educational institutions continues to be a pressing concern. Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies, Dalits often encounter subtle and overt forms of exclusion, from lack of access to elite institutions to everyday microaggressions. However, texts like *The Scar* also point toward possibilities. They show that with adequate support, determination, and policy intervention, education can be a powerful agent of change. The narrative calls for more inclusive pedagogies, anti-caste curricula, and sensitization programs that address the root causes of discrimination. There is also a need to decolonize the curriculum by integrating Dalit histories, literatures, and perspectives into mainstream education. Such initiatives would not only empower marginalized students but also foster empathy and awareness among all learners.

10. Conclusion

K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* is a poignant and powerful meditation on the role of education in the lives of marginalized individuals. It presents education as a double-edged sword—both a means of emancipation and a mirror of systemic inequality. Through his personal

journey, Gunasekaran illustrates the resilience required to navigate an educational system that is often hostile to Dalits. Yet, despite these challenges, *The Scar* offers a hopeful vision. It affirms that education, when pursued with courage and supported by community, can become a transformative force. The text not only contributes to the corpus of Dalit literature but also compels educators, policymakers, and readers to re imagine education as a space of justice, dignity, and empowerment. In doing so, it invites a broader social dialogue about the kind of educational spaces we must strive to create—spaces that do not simply impart knowledge, but cultivate equity, self-worth, and critical consciousness in every learner.

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