

From Reticence to Responsibility: A Reading of K. A. Gunasekharan's *The Scar*

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Autobiography is "historical in method, and at the same time . . . represent[s] . . . the self in and through its relations with the outer world. It involves the reconstruction of a movement of life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived" (Roy Pascal qtd in Porter and Olbricht 153). Beyond narrating the writer's experience, an autobiography is contextualized within a larger socio-historical process making it both a historical record and a literary product. The ideological conflict between historians and writers cease to exist in certain cases where one can notice a consensus regarding the legitimacy of the two in recreating the past. Dalit autobiographies are perfect examples of this case since history is being re-inspected and deconstructed from the perspective of the victims and the marginalized. This also accounts for the Dalit writers adopting autobiography as an important narrative strategy. In fact, Dalit autobiography and literature, if taken in postmodern terms, can be considered as "meta narratives" that disrupt the centrality celebrated by "grand narratives."

John Donne says, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (Meditation XVII). K. A. Gunasekharan's autobiography echoes these lines since it is a

collective document like any other Dalit life writing which telescopes the predicament of the community through the lens of individual experience. According to critics, Dalit writings reject the notion of "I" and incorporate the collective notion of "we" where even bodily experiences are presented as communal. As Ravikumar in the introduction to *The Scar* comments, "though he talks about himself in this autobiography, he does not portray himself as a hero. A bigger community is seen through his story" (xvi). The subalternity of the Dalits in *The Scar (Vadu)*, is established through the caste-based social and economic structure of Indian society. In a land where caste governs conscience, even art and literature prove to be the privilege of the majority denying cultural space to the minority. Gunasekharan's autobiography documents the historical struggle of the Parayar community against caste discrimination in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

History shows that Parayars were treated as untouchables from thirteenth to the mid twentieth century. The word "Paraya" means outcaste or untouchable and was derived from the caste name Pariah since the people belonging to the caste were treated very low during the British rule. The name is also believed to have been derived from the Tamil word, "parai" meaning drum as they served as drummers during marriage, funeral and other ceremonies.

Gunasekharan, who was born in the Parayar community in Marandai was brought up at Elayankudi in Ramanathapuram district. The practice of untouchability was less in Elayankudi when compared to Marandai because of the dominant Muslim population. The casteless relationship that he had with the Muslims there made him think of Islam as a great religion. Unlike in Elayankudi, even the Muslims in Marandai, influenced by the caste devil of the Hindus, would ask for a person's religion before quenching his thirst. If he was a Paraya, they would not give water in the vessel but would only pour it in the folded palm leaf. Gunasekharan recounts how they were afraid to drink water even from the canal which also made them cautious about the water not getting muddy. "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" (21). This testifies to the pain endured by the untouchables in India for they remained the "wretched of the earth." To Sharankumar Limbale, Dalit literature is purposive, revolutionary and has the power to transform

the society. Validating Limbale's argument, Gunasekharan states in the preface, "Dalit youngsters who read *Vadu* may be inspired to realize 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" (viii). This radical ideology that we notice in Dalit literature today is because of the revolutionary thoughts and actions of B. R. Ambedkar. On the one hand, Gunasekharan exposes the exploitation of the caste Hindus but on the other, he also accuses his community for their slavishness. Every Paraya and Chakiliyar house had an upper caste master and they were proud to talk about their "master's house" in their conversation. They would even make mats, winnows and boxes with palmyra leaves during the harvest festival for their masters and in turn would be given dress, money and cooked rice. When a member of the upper caste died, it was the duty of the local people from the *cheri* to convey the message to their relatives. Instead of being paid, the man would receive a measure or two of paddy as wages. When they were offered food, they had to cut a palmyra leaf to receive it. Gunasekharan seems to assert that the existence of the master rested upon the servility of his servants and as long as they were submissive and docile, they would continue to be exploited.

Literally and metaphorically, the Dalits lived on the margins. Their settlements often existed outside the boundary of the village making them the permanent Other of the caste Hindus. What makes the condition of Dalits different from the other religious, linguistic or cultural group is that they are "part of Hindu society, and yet apart from it. Inscribed in that apartness and difference is inferiority" (Limbale 2). Gunasekharan's autobiography underscores this fact by elucidating how an untouchable was treated differently by the three different religions in our country. In Elayankudi, there was a separate habitation for Parayars and Chakiliyars called "RasoolaSamudram" in which there was a Lutheran church where he went with his friend Wilson to sing during Christmas. While the doors of Hindu temples remained closed in front of them, the church doors were kept open to all whatever their caste was. Gunasekharan ruminates how he could never enter the Siva Temple in Elayankudi which was situated in a place where the Arya Vysyas lived. He had never been inside the temple even to this day but was only allowed to touch the idol of the God placed outside. He also learnt a lot about

Islamic rituals and to escape casteism many a time he had even thought of getting converted to Islam. While he remained outside his own religion, the other religious communities embraced him. Being the son of a progressive thinker, he was not influenced by any of the faith in particular.

To escape from the hegemony of the caste Hindus and for the prospect of a better life and educational opportunities, many Dalits, including Gunasekharan's family, sought conversion to Christianity. "I often wondered if it was because we became Christians that we had the opportunity to escape the caste-ridden village like Keeranoor by educating ourselves" (45). Yet many maintained their former religion in the records for the sake of reservation. Despite their conversion, the practice of untouchability haunted them throughout their lives in different ways. In school, when it was time to fill up the scholarship forms, Gunasekharan and the other students of his community were forced by the school authorities to reveal their caste identities. He narrates how degrading it was for them to be labelled as Parayars or Chakiliyars before their friends who never knew what their castes were.

The upper caste believed that they would be polluted if they were touched by a Dalit. As analyzed by Alok Mukherjee in Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, "the inferior location of Dalits is not only spatial but also normative. The Dalit is untouchable. The play of desire and revulsion works here in a very particular way. The works of the Dalits are essential for maintaining the upper caste Hindu's purity . . . Dalits enable the purity of upper caste society and become impure in the process. This society needs the Dalits' labour, indeed depends on it for its elegant survival, but does not wish to be reminded of it" (30).

He further elaborates that this desire and revulsion can be read in the psychological framework of desire and taboo put forward by the post-colonial critics like Fanon and Homi Bhabha. Recollecting his childhood experience, Gunasekharan narrates two incidents to expose the arrogance of the upper caste. Only the higher caste people were allowed to use the good road which led to Keeranoor and the people of the lower caste had to take the path that was dirty and full of thorns. Once, he was slapped by an upper caste

man who walked opposite to him on a narrow bund in the field. He was confused about this encounter until he was informed by his aunt that a Dalit ought to stand at least eight feet away from a caste Hindu. The other incident was related to the experience of his cousin whom he called Muniyandi Machan, a doctor who was made to prostrate before the Panchayat for forgiveness for trying to save a caste conscious Hindu from his epileptic attack. "According to untouchability ideology, it is not that a high caste alone is not allowed to pick up a low caste fallen on the road, but it demands that a low caste man must not render help to a high caste" (xv).

A name determines and defines one's sense of self and gives identity to an individual. The Dalits did not have the privilege of being addressed by their original names and were often nicknamed by the villagers. Gunasekharan's grandfather, Karunanidhi, though a respected man of his village owing to his education, was called as Karupa. Every member of the *cheri* had their grandnames and nicknames. It was the prerogative of the upper caste to be addressed by their "sophisticated names" (47) while the lower caste had to remain content with the names accorded to them by their upper caste masters.

It is with great pain and desperation that Gunasekharan writes, "our country is still in a state where village and caste are inseparable" (62). While the boys of all castes mingled outside the village, the system demands them to be conscious of their castes in the village. The upper caste boys had to be addressed as "Ayya" or "Sami," and the girls as "Aachi" or "Nachiyar." To further exemplify this, he writes about another incident from his cousin, Machan Muniyandi's life. Muniyandi, who was a doctor used to get great respect when the Konars and the like visited him at Madurai hospital, but the respect gets deteriorated gradually by the time they reach the bus stand and further at Elayankudi market finally in addressing him as "EiMuniyandi" in their own village. Muniyandi, being a firsthand victim of caste discrimination knew that the respect one got in cities was not to be expected in a village. He had also realized that "the dance of the caste devil in the villages" (65) was more restrained in the cities.

Migration was a common phenomenon among the folk art-

ists of this community to escape the oppression of the caste Hindus. Otherwise even their artistic talent would have to be showcased as mere service to the upper caste. None of the drummers who came to Elayankudi from his mother's birth place, Keeranoor would reveal their acquaintance with Gunasekharan's parents for they did not want to disclose their identity as Parayars. In the words of Ravikumar, "Folk artists are generally not restrained by conventions. Hence they are relatively free." Being a folk artist, Gunasekharan too had experienced this sense of freedom.

Apart from migration, education also played a decisive role in improving the quality of life of the Dalits. Like Bama who believes, "Because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke of the language of caste-difference and discrimination" (Bama 20), Gunasekharan perceived the uplift of his community only through education. But poverty proved to be a great hurdle for the Dalits pursuing higher studies. They had to endure all kinds of ill-treatment from the authorities to achieve their ambition. Gunasekharan and his brother, Karunanidhi were enrolled in the Harijan hostel during their high school classes since his father could not afford their studies. The warden did not give the inmates proper food, soap or oil that they ought to get. Almost all the days, they were left with half-filled stomach and had to walk two miles to and fro to have their lunch. Born in a poverty-stricken family, he never had three meals a day during his childhood days and had to be fed on soaked tamarind seeds as breakfast. But these bitter experiences did not drain the spirit out of him for he was so determined to escape the clutches of casteism. Now when he turns back the pages of history, he seems to declare with much satisfaction, "I struggled against poverty to get educated" (77). Gunasekharan and his brothers got educated only because they hailed from an educated family who knew the value of education. They did not pay heed to questions like, "will caste go away if you are learned?" (55). In spite of his poor financial condition, Gunasekharan never spared an opportunity to assist his Dalit friends at college with food and money.

As Gunasekharan has stated in the introduction itself, *The Scar* relates his experiences only upto his college days. Yet it proves to be a testimony to the traumatized condition of the Dalits in the villages of India. The title itself is suggestive of the mark left by the

wounds of casteism. What sets Dalit narratives apart from the mainstream writings is the unflinching portrayal of truth without a tinge of romanticization. Gunasekharan's writing too, is a search for the "self"; a search which unmask the self of his community which was marked by extreme silence and depravity. Neither does he wallow in self-pity nor does he invite sympathy from the readers. Ravikumar analyzes that Gunasekharan's language does not reflect the anger seen in the language of Namdeo Dhasal. Instead, that anger is infused in the readers; the anger against caste division and social discrimination. He seems to assert that only through education can his community establish an identity of its own in this society. It is a known fact that education gives knowledge and with it comes power. But, for the deprived, education and knowledge are means to a decent life and *The Scar* endorses this view.

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