

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5th Year of Open Access

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A Dalit's Voice of Oppression, Resistance and Empowerment: A Critique of K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar*

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This paper attempts to examine the struggles and sufferings of the Dalits for their survival and the space created by them in the Hindu society in the light of English version of K. A. Gunasekaran's Tamil autobiographical novel *Vadu* as a novel portraying the culture, manners, oppression, Dalit identity, existence as well as struggles for survival of Dalits who are double-oppressed by own people in Tamilnadu in the milieu of Christian, Muslim and Hindu communities. Also, the Dalits (Parayar, Chakliar etc.) become in the novel as representative of down-trodden and suppressed milieu. The novel sensitises the readers to millions of tortured indigenous people all over the world. Though the novel has its form as autobiographical but it represents to whole of the Dalit community or society of India. Gunasekaran narrates the familiar tale of caste-oppression and prevalent prejudices in the villages of Tamilnadu with the three communities. It not only narrates but ridicules the unjust practices of the superiority of upper caste people in the name of Hindu caste-system. It also emphasises on the fact that Indian villages are doubly caste-conscious and cruel. At last, it also focuses how the narrator empowers himself and emancipates from these unjust practices.

Though the novel does not cover the life time experiences of Gunasekaran but upto his graduation. He asserts:

I have related my experiences upto 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. (Preface to *The Scar*)

Dalit autobiographies were written first in 1930s. In the introduction of *The Scar* Ravikumar, a well known Tamil Dalit scholar, remarks the origin of Dalit autobiography, "At national level, Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasan are the precursors of Dalit autobiography as per research indicators at present." (x) But at the same time, Dr. Gangadhar Patnavane, Marathi dalit writer, says that: "Only Babasaheb Ambedkar is the first dalit autobiographer." (Translation Mine) (Prabodhan: Jan-Feb, 2009:11) By understanding the importance of Dalit literature Sarankumar Limbale remarks:

If you want understand the literature of movement, if you want to learn the struggle of emancipation, if you want to listen the cry for humanity, I think, you have to read Dalit literature. It is literature of life. (generallyaboutbooks)

Ravikumar, a well known Tamil scholar focuses in the introduction of *The Scar* how the Dalit literature emerges as a weapon to depict the prevailing unjust practices of 'untouchability' and 'caste-consciousness' in Hindu society. History, a string of incidents woven together like beads in a rosary, does not leave any trace of the Dalit people. Hence, they write history themselves. Autobiography is the consequence of their yearning to create

their society's history through their individual life story. Dalit autobiography has turned out to be not only to a part of the Dalit history but also an important node of Dalit literature. Dalit writers have been expressing their deep grieves, experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings about their lives in the casteist social system of India through their writings. Not only they are published in various Indian languages, but are also translated into English. Autobiographies of Narendra Jadhav, Sharankumar Limbale, Vasant Moone, Omprakash Valmiki, Laxman Mane, K.A. Gunasekaran and others have been translated into English and European languages. These translations have created a special place for Dalit literature at the global level. Though, there are some differences among critics regarding the responses to Dalit literature. Some feel it gaining visibility at the global level while others contemptuously look at it as a strategy of liberalisation to convert the Dalit sorrows into its assets. (Touchable Tales, 2003) Nevertheless, autobiography as a literary form has been used all over the world by the oppressed as a vehicle to project themselves. In the Dalit autobiographies one can see the inhuman aspects of 'untouchability'. In fact, Dalit autobiographies help to promote an ideology against 'untouchability'. K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* is a big success in Dalit autobiography placing it among canonical texts of Tamil literature. It talks about his life upto his graduation. Not only it is a record of his experiences, but it is a documentation of a certain time.

K.A. Gunasekaran, once the Director of International Institute of Tamil Studies (IITS) (ulakath thamizh Ar Acci niruvanam), an international Tamil Research Centre set up (in 1970) jointly and supported till today by UNESCO and the Govt. of Tamilnadu located in Chennai, Tamilnadu is a teacher, folk-artist, singer, dramatist and researcher. He was the Dean of the School of Performing Arts at Pondicherry University. Gunasekaran's award winning Tamil novel *Vadu* (2004), translated into English by V. Kadambari as *The Scar* (2009), has documented the life, customs, cultures, festivals, songs, dances of dalit Parayar community of Ramachandrapuram district in Tamilnadu as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivations, oppressions and exploitations by non-tribal or non-dalit.

The Parayar is one of the well known tribes of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and some part of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji and South Africa with their main religions as Hindu or Christian. The term 'Parayar' is sometimes also called as Paraiyar, Paraih or Adi-dravinian. They were traditionally farmers and weavers. According to historian R. Deva Ashirvathan, Parayars may be the descendents of Paradas or Mauryas, who were Buddhist and Jains, came to south India after the collapse of Buddhism and rise of Brahmanism in northern India. Owing to their Buddhist allegiance and refusal to adopt Brahmanism they were separately distinguished and ex-communicated with the rise of Brahminism. The late Bishop Caldwell derived the name Parayar from the Tamil word 'Parai' meaning to a drum, as certain Parayars act as drummers at marriages, funerals, village festivals and on occasions of government or commercial announcements proclaimed. The caste has given its own hamlets, wells and burning-grounds. (devendrakulam)

The literal meaning of the word 'scar' is a mark that is left on the skin after a wound has healed. Here, the word also contains permanent feelings of sadness as eternal pain that a person is left with after unpleasant experiences. It is also suggestive of something unpleasant or ugly that spoils the appearance or public image of something. Gunasekaran's multiple scars are portrayed cleverly or skilfully in this autobiography. They are not the proud medals or revealed sachets; they are the history of an individual and the community.

Poverty is a curse and perhaps a paralysing factor for sufferings, harassment and oppressions of Dalits in the society and it insists the individual to do different kinds of works

to earn some wages or money for survival. For Dalits, it forces to both men and women of the family to work as labourers. Most of the Dalits do not own any field for farming to produce some grains. Though Gunasekarn's father is a teacher and earning some money but it is insufficient to support his large family (six children- three male and three female) apart from looking after his second wife (Gunasekaran's cinamma i.e. mother's sister). All the children of both families are school going and it doubles the expenses of the family. The family has no field for cultivation of its own. His mother works, sometimes, at cinema's ticket counter or collects cow dungs/woods to sell to Muslims to earn few wages to support her family. To support his family Gunasekaran works to earn some wages in many ways like collecting of cow dung in his school bag, setting a running shop in his school, cutting of bricks in summer vacations along with his father, selling of fish and mangoes in the streets of Elayankudi, singing of carols, reading of letters/stories for Muslims women etc. to earn some wages to support his family. All these describe the harrowing picture of his family poverty. Good food is always a dream for entire family and consumes tamarind rice, barley, sometimes snails/shells and most of the time remains hungry or half-filled. His father settles his family in Elayankudi in a rented house having a big hall and no partition i.e. roomless house, made of thatches, which generally gives problems during rainy seasons.

The novel unfolds the bitter and harrowing experiences of 'untouchability' and 'caste-discriminations' various times at various places even at the public places like the Holy temples, schools and village play areas. This is not only faced/experienced by Gunasekaran himself but also by the whole Parayar, Chakiliyar or low-caste people. At Elayankudi, there is a Shiva temple in which Dalits are not allowed to enter. They bow their heads from outside only. Gunasekaran has never entered yet in the temple as he writes: "I have never been inside this temple even today" (1). It reminds the readers the famous lines by Sarankumar Limbale on the prevailing unjust practices of untouchability:

The Church bell rang
Everyone entered in
The Ajan heard from mosque
Everyone entered in
The bell of temples rang
Some interested in
And some stood outside. (generallyaboutbooks)

Actually, upper-caste people have not left any chance or moment to degrade/insult/exploit the dalits. Even in the school/hostel too, Parayar students face lot many discriminations. The cross-eyed school clerk asks in class: "How many in this class are Parayars? Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? Stand up, I will count." (5). In fact they want to reinforce caste identities by labelling them as Pallars, Parayars, Chakliyers in front of their friends who never know what the caste they belong to. The headman of his school is staying in Elayankudi itself but to sign the scholarship forms he calls the dalit students to his house to tie up the cow/cattle, pickup the cow dung and clean up the area etc. Then only he hardly signs the applications as Gunasekaran writes:

Father would feel frustrated every time he had to approach them for their signatures. It's horrid, the way they displayed their superiority before they sign anything. (9)

The most striking and unique about Dalits is that most of them are artists, actors and performers. During Karagattam (an acrobatic folk-dance in which dancer bears flower-decked, water-filled pot on her head) men perform the roles of women, the roles assigned by upper caste people and most of these men belong to lower caste. During the festival at

Amman temple many of the Nayandi Drummers belong to Keeranoor (his mother's birth place) but when they visit Gunasekarn's family, they keep their instruments in a shop on the way to hide their identity as low caste. After their departure his father says: "They do not want anyone to know that they belong to the Parayar clan. So they come to see us without the instruments and go away immediately." (3) It shows how the low caste people are feared of caste cruelty.

The evil of 'untouchability' is not limited only to the rural areas like Marandai, Thovoor and Keeranoor but also is the same in the town like Tanjavur. When the famous dancer Mallika invites Gunasekaran to see her dance at the temple at Tanjavur, Gunasekaran counters the same problem of untouchability there too. The low caste people are not allowed inside the temple, they are permitted to beat the drums from outside only.

Casteism and caste-discrimination are almost nil at Elayankudi because it is largely Muslim populated area. (Preface) Gunasekaran plans to convert into Muslim due to caste oppression as he says, "I have experienced harassment in the name of caste and have often thought about converting to Islam." (4) In fact, Muslims are not aware of the Hindu caste-system and Varnashram. They call these people as 'the Tamils' but villages like Marandai, Thovoor and Keeranoor are obsessed with casteism. Gunasekaran, while coming back via narrow band after buying oil from south Keeranoor, a man on the way is coming from the other end when he reaches near to Gunasekaran, he slaps without any cause and says: "Look at the cheek of the Parayar boy!" (43) Later on Gunasekaran comes to know that a Parayar should stay away by 8 feet while speaking, walking or standing with upper caste people like Konar etc. Once Gunasekaran was sleeping in the morning at his periamma's house, a boy of upper caste comes to him with spade and awakes him:

Hey! Who is this sleeping the even after the sun has come out? While I am standing who do you think you are to sit in such a leisurely manner on the cot? Get up! (53)

The novel sensitises the readers with many inhuman aspects of 'untouchability and caste-discrimination'. At Marandai (the original village of Gunasekaran), an eight year old upper caste boy hacks the branches of the tree that is full of flowers. Gunasekaran asks him, "Dei! Why are you cutting away the flowers and the tender fruits of our tree?" (51) In a fraction of second the boy slaps Gunasekaran. The boy comes along with some other persons and warns Gunasekaran in front of Karupa (grandfather of Gunasekaran):

Dei! Elayankudy boy, it is because of Karupa that you have escaped today, otherwise we would have skinned you alive and rubbed salt on you. 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)

Karupa pleads to forgive Gunasekaran by begging full length. Later on, Gunasekaran comes to know that upper caste people are addressed as 'ayya' or 'sami'. Konars (upper caste people) of Marandai are very careful about maintaining caste distinctions. They say Muniyandi machan, a doctor as doctor Thambi at his hospital in Madurai, and Muniyandi only elsewhere. Gunasekaran remarks on the follies of caste-consciousness:

Caste arrogance has been increasing as days go by. I don't know when these fellows will realise their folly. The two times that I was slapped across my

face, both in my father's village and mother's village, were due to caste issues. (51-51)

Another interesting and ridiculous incident is when a Konar farmer falls down due to fits while ploughing, doctor Muniyandi and Gunasekaran take him off the plough and sprinkle water from his porridge vessel. On becoming conscious the Konar farmer immediately says, "Who asked you to touch me? How can you, a Parayar touch me?" (60) Later on he brings this matter into evening Panchayat. According to the 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 also demands that a low caste man must not render help to a high caste as "Our country is still in a state where village and caste are inseparable." (62)

Even the street roads are not allowed to use by the low-caste people even during the social functions like marriage, though the Konar's cart is being driven by low caste people. "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) In fact there is no such route through which cart could pass to the cheri.

Gunasekaran and his community are always struggling for quest of identity. The novel unfolds the instances when he faces questions like "Who you are? What is your Varnashram? Don't you know the difference between your caste and ours?" (51) The old people of the village are much scared of the cruelty of the caste-system. Thatha (Grand-father)) says to Gunasekaran, "See boy! Even if they (upper caste people) are younger to us we have to show them respect." (51) It shows the intensity of fear and oppression among older people. Whenever someone goes outside the village he faces these problems. People are not allowing any body into the village without knowing their caste. Sometimes if someone likes to give water or food tells to make a bowl of banana leaf. "Any new comer who entered in the village will have to disclose his caste identity before entering the village." (62)

All the temples are not permitted for Parayaras, Chakliyors and other low caste people by the upper caste irrespective of their ability, capability, education and recognition. Even these people are not allowed to stand/walk/talk near to upper caste people, they have to maintain a gap of minimum eight feet with head bowed. Gunasekaran and his family are sufficiently educated but they have to obey/respect the younger lad of upper caste. All the low caste people are permitted to stay in cheri (a place outside the village) and or not allowed to mingle even in the schools or games. Though few of the upper caste boys/girls mingle in the school but they behave differently outside the school campus. Gunasekaran faces/experiences a strange discrimination when he is deprived of being selected for inter-college singing competition due to his low caste, in spite of being first in the college singing competition. Later on, Gunasekaran becomes a very good singer and his songs are being broadcasted on The Trichy All India Radio and his name as Elayankudi Gunasekaran.

The Parayar and Chakliyar community has no other marriage system than the traditional arranged system. Love-marriage or inter-caste marriage is not allowed even in the same caste too. If someone has love affairs, he has to face lots of hardships in the community. Now take the example of Michael Amma (a low-caste Pallar girl) engaged in love with a boy of Udayar caste (upper caste), thinking that upper caste people will not accept her, Amma agrees for her arranged marriage with someone else. The boy comes to her and chops off her head when she denies eloping with him and tells him, "Will your people allow to live if I get

married to you?" (37). Though, the boy is imprisoned for fourteen years and now working as a peon in a hospital.

The upper caste people have not only deprived the dalits from basic rights but have controlled their personal lives also by making oppressive and exploiting rules to them. The upper caste people have made a rule that no Parayar or Chakliyar girl/lady married/unmarried will always wear blouse in their village. Even the one who comes from other villages after traditional marriage is also not allowed to wear the blouse.

Though Gunasekaran is suffering a lot from untouchability, caste-discrimination and oppressions of upper caste, but gradually he becomes very bold enough and consoles himself as he sings a song, "Being scared, is being stupid." (11) It makes Gunasekaran mentally and physically very strong and he realises his potential in singing/acting and secures first position in inter-colleges singing competition.

Later on Gunasekaran is invited by Madurai Modern Orchestra to join and they use to send cars for him whenever it requires. He sings with the then famous Malaysian singers Chandra and Indra and receives great acclamation and appreciation by the audience. He learns karagam and kavadi from Om Periaswami during his M.A. first year at Shivganga Amman College. Professor Om Periaswami takes him to Delhi for republic day celebration in 1981. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister, invites all the artists for dinner at her house. Mrs. Ghandi shakes hands with him and enquires in English and advises him to do research in folk arts. He promises to do so and he does it so. The news papers of Madurai are full of photographs of Gunasekaran shaking hands with Mrs Indira Gandhi. Later on it results for his recognition nationally and internationally.

The lack of education is the main cause of the poverty and exploitation of dalits. Educated Dalit, like Gunasekaran and his family is also victim of this social caste-oppression. If they are not educated they will be deprived of their basic rights. The novel insists that education is the only force which can help the oppressed people to emancipate from the bondages of poverty, oppression, exploitation and discrimination. And it also helps to liberalise the people in the development of fraternity, brotherhood and humanity. The dalit autobiography is a good platform to create awareness not only among the dalits but also to break the visible boundaries of caste-discrimination.

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