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Quest for a Meaningful Life: A Case Study of K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar*

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Abstract:

K. A. Gunasekaran is widely held as the first Tamil Dalit playwright. His autobiography *Vadu* or 'The Scar' is the first of its genre that is written by a Dalit. This paper will primarily investigate the core issues of 'Dalit poetics' and its implication to the autobiography *The Scar*. Thus, this paper will dissect the meaning-making processes and practises of representation in Indian culture especially in Dalits. It will examine the politics of silencing the Dalit, the politics of suppressing his individuality, the politics of equating him with thoughtless and irrational human being, and declaring them as most inferior and untouchable part of society, among other.

Keywords: dalit literature, autobiography, K. A. Gunasekaran.

Dalit literature documents a significant and a discrete part of Indian literature. The literal meaning of the term 'Dalit' is oppressed, broken and downtrodden. The term 'Dalit literature' – came into use officially in 1958 at the first conference on Dalit literature in Mumbai. The appearance of the Dalit Panthers, a political organisation that was created in 1972 in Maharashtra, is a crucial point in the history of Dalit literature and gain momentous with the emergence of various political and social movements across the country. The term 'Dalit literature' signifies the creative and intellectual literary expression which transforms the social realities into various literary genres. It is a recent offshoot of Indian literature and represents an emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Dalit Literature is primarily a social and human document, which deals with the people who had been socially and economically exploited in India for hundreds of years.

The construction of the societies that is based on 'caste' system is responsible for scores of brutal and callous practices that is earlier documented by several people, and is being continued to record everyday in India. For one thing it tried its best in every generation to effectively block the participation of nearly 1/5th of India's humanity from making significant contribution to many fields. It continues to do so even after Independence. The established system that celebrate the eternal purity of sinister caste system and the authority and stature it brings would not only prevent Dalits from participating in mainstream life style, they would also cunningly decline them to acquire any identity and individuality. That system would also attempt to ensure that Dalits will remain preoccupied with their own suffering, deprivation, and poverty so that they do not pose any challenge to its authority. But the astute scholars and champions of Dalit rights put a stop to this kind of sinister and biased mentality using literature as a tool to fight back. Dalit poetics is not only a literature of protest and rejection but also a literature of reconstruction of past. Dalit writers raise voice against humiliation, subjugation, and call for implementation of social justice. They try to interrogate and deconstruct the caste supremacy.

The Scar or *Vatu* is an autobiography by a master story-teller and a prolific writer Prof. K. A. Gunasekaran who faces the ambers of dreadful caste system. It is a narrative of several people, weave together in overflowing concern for each other, transcending caste and pouring affection to affirm life. It talks about K.A.Gunasekaran's life up to graduation. The literal meaning of the word 'scar' is a mark that is left on the skin after a wound has healed. Here, Gunasekaran uses the word metaphorically. It is suggestive of the lasting impression of grief with that he is left with after unpleasant experiences of caste system. Gunasekaran portrays multiple scars with utmost craftsmanship in this autobiography. Though they are not the rewarding medals or revealed sachets, yet they are the history of an individual and the community which has been deprived of the status of human beings just because of the whim of some people.

In this autobiography, Gunasekaran gives a atrocious description of a fragmented and fractured social milieu where deprivation and discrimination range from denial of access to drinking water, village ponds, cremation ground, temples and many other resources for Dalits was rampant. By writing his life ordeals into his autobiography, he not only tries to demystify the pre-established dogmas, codes and canons but also enable the readers to understand the psyche of aspiring and promising Dalit youth. The kind of discourse Gunasekaran presented in *The Scar* is frequently populated with terrifying stereotypes about the Dalits which declare them as a sub-human, subservient, and submissive second-rate living creature. He offers an important critique of the nation after independence. Where, on the one hand, it enshrined in constitution that every citizen is equal irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, untouchability is still exist in society and several gruesome inhumanly practices is in full swim without any restriction from the state on the other. He illustrates every detail of those mortified experiences and humiliations very minutely but with a sense of dignity and humility.

The Scar depicts the heroic struggle of its protagonist K.A.Gunasekaran positioned at the bottom of the rigid Indian caste society and his successful attempt to over through the caste hierarchy made by so called 'high caste' people. His perseverance, determination and relentless resolution won him a remarkable place in society despite facing millions of misfortunes and hardships. His caste, Parayar was excluded from the mainstream society and was only allowed to pursue the menial occupations like cleaning, sweeping, tanning, working as a drummer or working as a landless labourer for meagre daily wages. This autobiography emphatically represents his struggle and determination for accomplishing degrees in higher studies and reputable place in society despite the stage of acute poverty and privation.

The other important attribute of *The Scar* is its presentation of self-consciousness of writer. Gunasekaran has been preoccupied with emancipation of 'self' since his childhood days. He never let his morale down despite facing hostile disposition of the 'upper caste', nor does he feel any anguish to be born in a Dalit community. He has been very conscious about his self respect and always has a high opinion for whole community from the beginning. He used to contemplate over the woeful and pitiable condition of Dalits and never has any thought to surrender to discriminating society. Prejudices and biases could not hinder his strenuous journey of self-realization as well as self-emancipation. He not only tries to emancipate himself but also strains for his whole community with all available means he has. His factual, concrete description becomes a powerful evocation of a harsh reality which a Dalit 'self' is undergoing in this civilized world since ages. He uses autobiography as a tool to write back to 'upper caste' and

highlight the miserable and disconsolately condition of Dalits as a result of unjust and uncultivated beliefs and traditions.

The Scar is not a story of a sobbing Dalit but of a triumphant Dalit, a symbol of dignity and humanity, telling the world that it is possible to bury caste! *The Scar* narrates the events of Gunasekaran's life growing up among the three religious communities i.e. Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. Gunasekaran had first felt caste-stratification while studying six, seven, and eight standard. Tracing the caste is a crucial discrimination. In this way, a school clerk would enter the class and ask:

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)

The scholarship application can either be handed over to the candidate by looking the school-record, or can be dispatched to home by post. The castist school clerk does not adhere to this method; rather, he turns up to the class and asks "How many Parayars?" to humiliate them. Tracing the caste of the people happens in all spheres of Indian life whether it is birth, death, or marriage ceremony, but Dalits are the inevitable victims of this malpractice.

In *The Scar*, Gunasekaran describes how he and well-heeled Muslim people live together in Elayankudi — a big village market place in Ramanathapuram district. As the son of a teacher, Gunasekaran was respected by all Muslim community, and he was given special access into their homes and mosque. He gladly highlights his relationship with Muslims living near his locality. He gives a very positive picture of life style of muslims in Elanyankundi where he never realize any caste difference exist. 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)

Muslims, in Elanyankudi, never discriminate him on belonging to Dalit community. They were exceptionally affable and had a friendly relationship with him. They never prohibit him entering into the Masque, or Dargah or into their household. They also give him sugar and dates after *fatiha* is recited during the celebration at *dargah* and porridge in Ramzan which help his family to mitigate their hunger. His father also uses to take financial help from muslim families to educate his children. Every year, when school re-opened, his father would ask some rich Muslims *Jamaat* –muslim community, to help towards the cause of Gunasekaran's education. His friends and *Jamaat* also helped him to pay his school fees. 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 magnitude of caste superiority has devastated in his boyhood itself. This psychological humiliation made numerous scars in his heart. It is the prevailing social experience in every corner of India. This disgraceful discrimination was not peculiar to him; rather every person of his community routinely undergoes the identical experiences on each facet of life. He also observed the post-independent social conditions and documented them in his autobiography. Whenever Gunasekaran needs a signature for the scholarship application, the village headman behaves in such a way that humiliates him and his father to the core. The headman demands them to do some menial works to flaunt their caste superiority before signing any document:

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 signature. 'It's horrid, the way they display their caste superiority before they sign anything,' he would say. (9)

Once, Gunasekaran sets up a shop with a gift sheet in front of Thovoor School. A person can scratch as many spots as he has paid for. If lucky, he would get a gift. If unsuccessful, there would be no number. A boy from the "upper caste" comes to his shop and scratches many spots but denies paying the money. When Gunasekaran asks the money, the boy said "Get lost Paraya" and starts to run away. Gunasekaran chases the boy into the street and house of "upper caste" where he shouts at him and calls for his parents. In consequence, at the same evening, eight upper-caste men come with the boy to Gunasekaran's periamma's (aunt) house to beat him on account of his desecration of the "upper caste" locality. His relatives go down at their feet and requested them to spare him, but the "upper-caste" men openly insulted and snubbed them:

How can a fellow from your caste enter the upper caste street? And worse, how dare he enter our house. 'If the fellow had entered our house without knowing the limitations of his caste, then he must really be very arrogant. Where is he? Let's tie up his feet and hands, and carry him away,' they shouted. I was panic-stricken. (26)

In the following day, a few "upper-caste" people enter into his colony, and there was no resistance by the Dalits. Rather Dalit people have to be obedient and submissive to them. Konar people give warning to them against Gunasekaran's defiance, as a result he was sent back to Elayankudi to avoid further problems. In school days he does weeding work in farm land to earn some money. He purchases second hand cloths for Deepavali. It is the trend of low-caste people economic status in our state. Whenever, the irrigation tank has water in it, his grandmother used to take him to catch snails and slugs for their meat. It is Dalit people way of meal, snail, fish, and dry-fish etc. They never eat a full meal especially a decent meal. One day his grandmother sends Gunasekaran to a shop at south Keeranoor main-land where Konar people live. He buys cooking oil in a wood-chip bottle and walks back through the fields on either side of a narrow bund — it is usually for the ways of the Dalit people. At that moment, he sees a man coming in the opposite direction. As soon as seeing him, Gunasekaran takes one leg off the bund and gives him space to walk. In a hash of moment, he faces a slap on his cheek. He screams in pain:

'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 the 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)

He also makes an effort to point out the deteriorating condition of Dalit women, though not in very detailed manner, facing the triple marginalization in society i.e. being a woman, being a poor and being a Dalit. He carefully recounts the certain events which scars, even today, is unhealed. He describes how his mother unceasingly does a manual work throughout the day to earn little money. He says of an event when his Periamma states about the ordeal of Dalit womem in Thovoor:

‘From the day I came to thovoor, after my marriage, I have never worn a blouse. The cheri women were not allowed to wear blouses as per the caste regulations of the village. Girls my age who came to this village after their marriage too have been subjected to this practice, and have not worn a blouse to this day.’ (26)

Hence, by pointing out some of his humiliating experiences in detail, he attempts to draw attention to many inhuman practices of which he was the victim. His motive of writing these ordeals is not to arouse sympathy among the readers. Rather he wants that the world should know the plight of a Dalit youth in the present era. He wants to assert that even after India got the independence things are not change for the Dalit community. They are as discriminated and oppressed as once they were.

Since the early period of boyhood, Gunasekaran recognized caste discrimination in his school days. With the help of his sheer hard work and perseverance, he gets a space where caste overshadows everything. He was naturally a good singer on account of which The Congress party leader of Tamil Nadu Kamaraj appreciated his voice and offered Gunasekaran the Kalimar brand colour-soda which was served to him. He was later allotted to sing prayer and the National Anthem at school. Subsequently, he gets employment in AIR Trichy and becomes popular as Elayankudi Gunasekarn at a same time get himself enrolled in the Harijan Hostel for free education.

He received various wounds by untouchability and those made everlasting scars in his soul. The pains of both physical and psychological atrocities are documented in his autobiography. We can learn that the use of the abusive “Paraya” is common practice, a way of reducing the poor’s sense of self to his destined caste, a form of recognition that doubled as an insult. Most of the months of the years, Gunasekaran uses to go Tanjavur. He learns folk music. After receiving his M.A., he continued to stage the folk music show to educate his fellow people. His autobiography has turned out to be not only a part of the Dalit history but also an important note of Dalit literature. Not only is it a record of his experiences, but it is also a documentation of a certain time. It will help to promote an ideology against untouchability.

Thus, this autobiography highlights the relentless struggle of its protagonist K A Gunasekaran against the discrimination, privation, penury, and impoverishment. He faces various hurdles and misfortunes at every corner of life. In spite of confronting several impediments, he comes out victorious each time. He struggles for equality, identity, fraternity and, justice not only for himself but also for his whole community. Therefore, he attempts to give himself a meaningful life beyond the murky lanes of discrimination that is based on the hollow doctrines of the caste system. His endeavour in *The Scar* is to give light to the disheartened and crestfallen Dalit youths that to break the manacles of the caste system is not an insurmountable task. One can gain success and repute by way of his/ her determination and hard work without being frustrated and disgruntled. Furthermore, the message of this autobiography is not limited to the Dalits alone, rather Gunasekaran's voice stands for all those people who are depressed, marginalised, threatened, underprivileged, and deprived on account of belonging to certain sector, religious group, gender, or linguistic group.

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