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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Bildungsroman

A Study of Pain and Poverty in K.A. Gunasekaran's 'The Scar'

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Dalit autobiographies portray struggles, atrocities and caste consciousness existing in an orthodox Indian society. K.A. Gunasekaran hails from the Dalit community, formerly considered as 'Untouchables' in India. As a Dalit, he had experienced discrimination and exploitation at various levels—physical and psychological. His education and self-determination to overcome all forms of discrimination motivated him to experience life beyond the limitations imposed upon him by his birth.

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Slaughter (2007) stated that 'the *Bildungsroman*, which has its antecedents in the evaluation of the eighteenth century novel in Germany, came to fruition in England during the Victorian era with the works of Charles Dickens and George Eliot. It is a genre that relates an individual's development from childhood to maturity within a given social order. Scholars have identified 'idealist' and 'realist' versions of the genre. The former posits a more dialectical relation between the individual and society, one in which both are malleable and the individual has sufficient initiative to transform the existing social norms even as he or she comes to maturity. In the realist version, the individual has no agency to change society, but achieves wholeness by adapting to existing social mores and structures. The narrative

takes us through the protagonist's often arduous and agonising journey, both physical and psychological, as he confronts many obstacles, challenges the dominant norms of the social order he was born into, and eventually learns to adapt his desires and aspirations to them. The journey ends with the hero as fully 'socialised, normalised, and incorporated' with members of his society.

'The Scar' is a modern Dalit autobiography and is an important work for Dalit assertion and emancipation. It reiterates the fact, that, Indian villages are doubly caste-conscious and cruel. Therefore, the emancipation of the Dalits, rests in better education for the community. The author, K.A. Gunasekaran narrates the familiar tale of caste oppression and prejudices prevalent in Indian society. The narration unfolds the pain and anguish suffered by the author since his childhood. It expounds on how the dalit community has managed to traverse and work around differently with Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities.

With increasing visibility of Dalits in the Indian public sphere and their vociferous demands for a just political and social order, Dalit life-narratives have gained significance. These narratives are important not only when located in the contemporary global context of the proliferation of narratives and testimonies of human rights violations in other parts of the world, but also in the context of an emerging conversation on the nature of 'Dalit Personhood' in the Indian public sphere, a category infinitely more complex than legal subjectivity and abstract citizenship. The Dalit narratives analysed here are rich illustrations within this framework. These narratives bring to the fore the peculiar non universal nature of Dalit pain, which are not wholly translatable in the lexicon of rights and justice. By invoking the historical and rhetorical force of two prose fictional genres, the *Bildungsroman* and the *picaresque*, the analysis has sought to recast the testimonio less as a proxy for the legal witnessing and amelioration of Dalit pain than as a rich and expressive medium of Dalit personhood. Reading about the lives of Dalits, through this genre, accords India's ex-untouchables a stature beyond that of victims at the mercy of the capricious sentimentality of upper-caste solidarity.

'The Scar' belongs to the genre of life-writing and it has been an important work in Dalit literature. Life-writing texts were first written in Marathi in the 1980s with the beginning of the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra. This analysis attends closely to the formal qualities of the texts and makes a case as to why a simple categorisation of this work under

the rubric of *testimonio*—an eyewitness account of collective suffering in the first person—is inadequate to convey their narrative potential to bestow ‘personhood’ on the suffering Dalit. The term *testimonio* gained currency in biographical studies in the 1990s to describe first person accounts of horrific abuses suffered by minority groups around the globe. Its roots lie in the word ‘testimony,’ which means testifying or bearing witness in a Court of Law. In 1992, the Latin American historian, John Beverley facilitated its translation into the lexicon of literary genres by defining *testimonio* as ‘a novel or novella-length narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a life or significant life experience.’

Hence, the author has attempted not only to problematise the genre of *testimonio*, but also to recast ‘The Scar’ as variations of other literary genres – the *Bildungsroman* and the *picaresque*. These latter genres do not invest in the notion of ‘witnessing the truth’ of history in any transparent way, but are nevertheless apposite in attributing a form of ‘personhood’, to the Dalit protagonists that both resonates with and exceeds the dynamics of subject-making in liberal democracies. Both trace the process of coming into mature adulthood by a protagonist who encounters many hurdles and painful setbacks amidst a hostile and intractable social ethos during the course of an arduous physical and psychological journey.

K.A. Gunasekaran’s ‘The Scar’ is a graphic and confronting narrative of the life experience of a *Paraya*—an aboriginal agricultural community and one of the Dalit communities formerly known as Untouchables—from Elyankudi village in Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu. The Dalits lived in abysmal conditions in the villages of Tamil Nadu. They were segregated from the upper-caste residents and forced to live in filthy enclaves, away from the main land. The narration begins with the author’s recollection of his days in the surrounding villages near Elayankudi.

Gunasekaran describes the life led by him and the upper caste Muslim people living in Elyankudi, a big village market place in Ramanathapuram district. As a son of a teacher, Gunasekaran was respected by the Muslim community and was given special access into their homes and the mosque. He often went along with his Muslim friends to the mosque for prayers. Similarly, Gunasekaran frequented the *Rasoola Samundram* – inhabited by the *Parayars* and *Chkiliyars* (*Arundathiyar*) only. His friend, Wilson,

taught him to play the 'harmonium'. Along with Kalairaj and Dr. Muniyandi, Gunasekaran staged plays during Christmas.

Gunasekaran had first experienced caste-stratification in school. 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 Chakiliyas*.... (5)

To help finance his education, Gunasekaran's father appealed to some rich Muslims. As his father was illiterate, he had to approach Karnam, the village headman (VAO) for his signature. They were often humiliated by the headman and in return for the signature, were obliged to perform various tasks.

If they saw us in the village they would ask us to tie up their cattle, dig a canal, and so on, 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.

Throughout his school days, Gunasekaran did weeding work in farms to earn money. He accompanied his grandmother to the irrigation tank to catch snails and slugs for their food. Dalits generally eat snails, fish, dry fish etc. Very rarely can a dalit afford to eat a decent meal. Gunasekaran purchased second hand clothes for Deepavali.

Once, his grandmother sent him to a shop to buy oil at south Keeranoor, occupied by the Konar people. He had to walk through fields on a narrow bund. On seeing a man coming from the opposite direction, he lifted one leg off the bund to allow easy access. On passing by, the man slapped Gunasekaran.

"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 she said, 'See we belong to a *Paraya* household, and they are *Maravars*. When we see 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.'

Untouchability has had tremendous physical and psychological repercussions on dalits. The abusive '*Paraya*' is used synonymously with dalits.

Gunasekaran experienced and understood the implications of caste discrimination early in life. In spite of his status, he was respected by his Muslim friends. They appreciated his mannerisms. He was also a good singer. Kamaraj, a Congress leader, offered him the Kalimar colour-soda in appreciation of his voice. As a student, he was selected to sing devotional songs and the National Anthem at school. Later, he sang for AIR Trichy and became popular as Elayankudi Gunasekarn. His brother, Karunanidhi, enrolled him in the Harijan Hostel for free education.

The caste discrimination experienced in his boyhood had a devastating effect on Gunasekaran's psyche. This psychological humiliation made another scar in his heart. Post-independence, he observed that all dalits in India experienced similar discrimination.

Gunasekaran narrates another painful experience. He had set up a shop with a gift scheme in front of the Thovoor School in his village. A boy from the upper caste refused to pay. When Gunasekaran asked him to pay up, the boy yelled, "Get lost Paraya!" and ran away. Gunasekaran chased him to his house and called for his parents. That same evening, eight upper caste men came to his *periamma*'s (aunt) house. Gunasekaran's relatives fell at their feet and pleaded for mercy:

"Ayya, he is my younger sister's son and is brought up in a town. He does not know anything about our village ways." The men kept asking, "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.

When upper-caste people enter the colony of dalits, they do not offer any resistance. Rather, the Dalits are extremely passive and obedient. On a warning issued by the Konar people, Gunasekaran was forced to leave Elyangudi.

During one summer vacation, Gunasekaran went to Tanjavur and joined a group of folk artists. They performed the '*Karagattam*' dance for temple processions. Gunasekaran played the '*thamuku*' and '*pambai*' and also sang cultural songs. He earned enough money to fund his college and hostel fees. After receiving his M.A., he continued to stage folk shows.

Lauren Berlant (2000) perceptively notes that narratives assume that the law describes what a person is, and that social violence can be located the way physical injury can be treated.

Gunasekaran was the Dean of The School of Performing Arts at Pondicherry University. He is interested in folk theatre (folk art and literature), music, writing novels and directing plays. Currently, he is Director of International Institute of Tamil Studies, Chennai.

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