

‘THE SCAR’: K. A. GUNASEKHARAN’S SAGA OF EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INHERENT LITERARY GENIUS

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Abstract

God created man equally, but men create caste system, which divided us all. And this Paper presents a story that highlights how man himself created paths of struggle and discrimination for another man. Through the book, “The Scar”, Gunasekharan tries to bring forth the conditions in villages especially in South India where people are more caste conscious, appear to be stringent and unapologetic and the so called Dalit community had to bear the burden of being who they were- bearing atrocities many of which appeared to be inhuman. But there is one thing that is to be understood for all times to come. Be it any society, change is for sure, whether horizontal or vertical and society changes as per advancements in Science & Technology and growth in education. Education acts as an empowering tool. Here, Gunasekharan mentions the life of Paraya community in a realistic way and mentions lucidly how they have been portrayed as agricultural workers in their typical traditional roles. He struggled hard to fight for the caste system and getting good education, which ultimately paved the way for emancipation of himself and his people. He talks about injustice and also how unequal they were treated in their own society and country. Being much inspired by the life and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar, his parents continuously inspired him.

Keywords: Dalit, Caste, Education, Justice, Village, Values, Historical text etc

Caste tendencies, mediocrities and orthodoxy related to caste has always been prevalent in India. Each caste has its own nuances, ways of living, belief systems and much more to conform to its typical society. Under such circumstances, K. A. Gunasekharan was growing up to conform to what is called a ‘low caste’ with other predominant higher

castes dominated by Hindus, Christians and Muslim communities. The Parayar caste of Tamil Nadu had suffered a deep pain and ridicules from the so called Upper castes, their unethical moral and unjust practices.

In his book “The Scar”, Gunasekharan tries to bring forth the conditions in villages especially in South India, where people are more caste conscious, appear to be stringent and unapologetic and the so called Dalit community had to bear the burden of being who they were- bearing atrocities many of which appeared to be inhuman. But there is one thing that is to be understood for all times to come. Be it any society, change is for sure, whether horizontal or vertical and society changes as per advancements in Science & Technology and growth in education. Education acts as an empowering tool. Gunasekharan truly believed that Dalit emancipation would be due to better education not just for his community but also for others. This would empower others also to understand the ideals of his caste and his people. Gunasekharan uses lucid language and style to depict the innocence, cruelty and the life he spent at a South Indian Village. He talks about the essence of the people and that of the village. The book stands important in the context of emancipation of the Dalits in India. It is considered to be the first modern autobiography in Tamil. One can imagine the great heights that a person can reach with better education. Gunasekharan appears to be an epitome in this context. Being an avid researcher and also holding the position of Dean of the School of Performing arts at a prestigious University, Gunasekharan stands tall and leads by example. He quotes in the preface of the book:

Gunasekharan reminisces his early days, as he asserts them to be associated with the people who followed Islam. While in School, he does not remember any caste differences that existed in Elayankudi. However, just at a distance of some kilometers, say two kilometers away, there existed a huge trench of differences. Contemplating on extensive differences of caste and its implication in creating social differences, Gunasekharan thought of developing “Vadu” –meaning ‘Scar’. These differences are so much visible and heartening and hurtful that it reminded the author time and again of its horrors. He wept many a time, remained dismal, teary and agitated.

Gunasekharan talks about the village Kalikulam near Thayamangalam which reminds him of his friend Samidoss, and also with whom, he associates Samidoss. Gunasekharan remembers an incident when a Kudukkuduppaikkaran, at midnight entered a cheri making an eerie sound that was very familiar with that tribe. Samidoss was frozen with fear while the author tried to make a mock at this. Both Samidoss and the entire village mongers and villagers thought that, something was ghostly and would incapacitate whosoever saw that ghostly being. Everyone hid here and there and none came out. While people were horrified, the author humble in deportment and quiet reasonable in behavior, smart and intelligent, tried

to take the entire event in his stride. He moved out of the place announcing that something bad would really happen at that place. This incident tells how, in the darkness of ignorance and in the spell of superstitions, the villagers led their lives. Gunasekharan, decided to move out of that cradle of ignorance and show the people that with knowledge and reason, society can be led in a better way and also that caste discrimination would not exist. But for that much hard work was to be done.

With these words, Gunasekharan tries to tell the readers about the mythical acts and superstitious practices, which would have descended from the ancestors, still were used by the people. Much of it appeared horrifying to young Gunasekharan. Gunasekharan also remembers how in the Muslim community, the fakirs would go round the street and keep singing by using a small drum and many such instances.

Gunasekharan mentions his college days experience and how he got involved in Marxist movements. Also how his fight with the caste ridden society made him grow stronger and stronger. Many would be just introduced to the way of Dalit life. It is a text of the oppressed class where a different self emerges as link between the worldly matters and the existing cradle of the caste based society. Gunasekharan mentions that their caste were oppressed, deprived and exploited. Having suffered social segregation and the purity – profanity divide, poverty remained with them and economic divide was clearly visible in social classifications. Therefore, as we further try to study this text, we find that the forms of oppression and structures of knowledge have been different for the Dalits and that this also reflected the values of the Dalits. How can the society be so heartless? After all we all are but humans! Gunasekharan tries to explore the historicity of Dalit's struggle. Untouchability still exists in the modern Indian society although as per Article 17, Untouchability has been banned and education is provided to the Dalits. The mindsets of the people have not changed. And therefore, Gunasekharan finds a subaltern identity for himself and his class all the time. He shows how conversion into a different religion and recognition reflected the plight and sufferings of the Dalits. Gunasekharan openly criticizes the Brahmins and the Hindu caste system. The text clearly shows their inferior and secondary position in the Hindu patriarchy and how they were directly affected by Christianity.

“Our parents told us to say that we were Christians if anyone asked us about our caste. They believed that Christians were not as obsessed with caste as Hindus were”. (12).

The text talks about the higher values and beliefs reinstated in Christianity. The story glorifies Christianity and speaks about how conversion helped to bring about education and better life. It states that conversion to Christianity provided them with food, shelter and education by the Christian missionaries. “...many Thevars converted to Christianity in order to work under the whites and to take up the (49).

Gunasekharan opined that the Britishers did not practice untouchability and provided better opportunities and therefore this influenced a majority of the Dalits to convert into Christianity. The story highlights the efforts and struggles of the Gunasekharan in protest against the oppression and exploitation in the rigid caste system in India.

“I would be oppressed by anger at failing and inflamed by a desire to study.”(15). The Dalits were rejected and ignored, and were neither allowed to enter the streets of the upper castes nor their houses. Gunasekharan could never this kind of a strain and he did thrash an upper caste boy at his own house for some wrong done to him.

The caste system strictly limits mobility of lower castes and confines them to the ghettos (cheri). As the narrator has the courage to chase the high caste boy in the latter's own locality and beat him up for the injustice, he wonders that even his own people are less concerned about his well being but bother more about the dalit's entry in their area: “Nobody talked about the boy who was beaten. They were only worried about a Paraya entering their street and their own house, not caring for the rigidity of caste”. (26).

The people of this caste cannot enter the temples and also are not allowed to use the same bathing ghats. We did not know which caste this canal belonged. ‘If it belongs to the upper caste we would be tied to the tree and beaten.’(21). ‘We were Parayars, they would not offer us a drink in a vessel, but would pour it only in the folded palm leaf’. (20).

This clearly shows how life for a Parayar caste in Tamil Nadu that time would have been. The writer as a child had faced the grimace from the then society and just because his own dignity was maligned as per the prevalent caste system, he shifts to other religions.

“I have experienced harassment in the name of caste and have often thought about converting to Islam”. (4). Still his own family was a big support for Gunasekharan. His family rejected the notion of the Varna system and refused to evaluate the Dalit life style in accordance with the mainstream Hindu values. His father often narrated to him the stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. His father had a modern and progressive thinking.

“Our parents never showed any special interest in God, temples and rituals. We too never came under the influence of faith because of them”.(83). Gunasekharan mentions the turbulence of the caste system in the following manner.

“At Keera noor, Maravars placed themselves at higher level and were privileged as Brahmins. At the writer’s maternal aunt’s place, the Konars were the Brahmins. ‘The Konars were not treated well by the Brahmins, and they in turn appropriated the caste arrogance of the Brahmins and showed it to the people of the cheri.’”(36). Though Government may plan and promote for schemes such as medical care of the children coming to the school from weaker sections but the narrator presents the reality in his story. Many preventable diseases, affect thousands of children every year, supply of the free medicines not only provide incentive for children to come to school but they also serves to keep them healthy. “If we were asked about where we stayed, we were not to divulge information about Harijan Hostel. Those who had itches and fungal infections should go to their houses until they were cured. These were some of the advices given to us unfaillingly at the prayer assembly by our hostel leader.” (6).

The position of Dalit women was equally alarming. Gunsekharan’s mother was educated but she was not allowed to go for a job just because of the patriarchal set up. She remains confined to home and would occasionally sell movie tickets in front of Cinema halls; and had to collect firewood for cooking.

“As she cut the thorn trees she would sing quietly the songs of lamentation ruing her fate. I would pay attention to her songs, but I would never fully understand my mother’s soulful keenings”.(80). Women’s sexuality had a major concern in those as it is still in modern times with changed equations. However, dalit women’s life was more inclined towards maintaining purity. That was important to maintain the socio religious hierarchy of caste.

Gunasekaran discusses the myth prevalent in his village of the murder of Michael Amma who fell in love with upper caste boy. He then narrates the story of Thangarasu and Tamlarasu who wisely left the country to settle abroad to save their lives after inter-caste marriage: “The idea that the village exists because of caste must change, only then inter caste marriages are possible. If a Dalit and a girl of a different caste were to fall in love, they would not be able to live peacefully unless they get out of their village and went away to town. Even then in some places, they are not able to save their lives. The village high caste people, wanting to safeguard caste, would round up the couple who lived in town and finish them off quietly”. (39).

Therefore, in his writings, Gunasekharan mentions the life of Paraya community in a realistic way and mentions lucidly how they have been portrayed as agricultural workers in their typical traditional roles. He struggled hard to fight for the caste system and getting good education which ultimately paved the way for emancipation of his himself and his people .he talks about injustice and also how unequal they were treated in their own

society and country. Being much inspired by the life and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar, his parents continuously inspired him.

“If you study you can live in a dignified manner. So study hard, and whatever you have read, tries to think about it with closed eyes” (81).

And that became the soul of Gunasekharan, with these ideals, he crafted his life based on creativity and education. Gunasekharan narrated the scars of his life beautifully in the novel like; the scars of poverty, untouchability, caste and discrimination etc. The Indian society and culture has a great history of caste discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. Also, this auto biography impresses upon the readers, the importance of staying positive in life and how, when driven by passion and zeal towards working for others, living for others, leads a humane life, still nurturing and growing. The auto biography presents a saga of struggle for good and humane tendencies.

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