

CROSSING THE BORDERS OF CASTE: A STUDY OF K.A. GUNASEKARAN'S *THE SCAR*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to see the impact of caste in the lives of dalits with special reference to K.A. Gunasekaran's The Scar. Ambedkar said "Political Democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of its social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity which are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity." The Scar explores very well that provisions alone cannot serve the purpose of eradicating widespread inequality that still persists in the minds of men. Dalit is a muted voice: Jeopardized owing to its caste, status, marginalized and financial situation, it can hardly speak of its affliction. We have many provisions for providing social democracy but the point is how far this aim is realized. This paper aims at pointing at what juncture is dalit community standing? Is liberty and equality that every human being owes given to them? Gunasekaran beautifully portrays the struggle, hardships and the trauma that a dalit has to face. Nevertheless there is a hope and scope for change, which might be slow but not inevitable.

The Scar gives voice to a marginalized section of a society. The autobiography by K.A. Gunasekaran shows the struggles of an individual to attain a respectable status, an appeal to have a human life. The provenance of Indian social, economic and political life lies in religion and it was religion upon which was based the traditional social system of "varnas." The classification of works among human beings became hereditary and a permanent system of caste was fabricated within the strands of society. Caste became a birth mark.

Caste has been seen as omnipresent in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, or at least no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India's other core symbol-- Hinduism-- we must understand caste, whether we admire or revile it. (Dirks 3)

Ambedkar was the first one to use the word "Dalit." But this was popularized by Dalit Panthers during the second wave of Marathi Dalit movement in 1972. Lakshmi Holmstrom quotes in the Introduction to *Sangati*: "Who are dalits? All Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

Tribes, neo-Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute, peasants, women, all those who have been exploited politically and economically in the name of religion are Dalits.”(xii) Dalit is simply not a status, a mark of identity that is attached to someone; “Dalit” is the very perspective, a categorical lens through which a human being is observed. Contrary to terms like harijan, scheduled castes or low-castes or shudra, the word “dalit” carry in itself the pride, the honour as great as the mother Earth itself. Dalit means “oppressed” or “ground down.” “Grounded to the Ground” (S.Z.H. Abidi); dalit remains as fertile as the earth. Earth that takes the wastes of all beings within itself, decomposes it and makes it ready for a new life. The life of a dalit is alike- it absorbs all the humiliations, atrocities and discriminations; powerlessness and fate wither away all agony and angst, and each day s/he is ready to face the world anew. This is the life of a dalit.

Gunasekaran writes: “Even now it hurts to think of those times when we had to stand up in front of the others in class, shrinking and cringing. They would reinforce caste identities by labeling us Pallars, Parayers and chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was” (Gunasekaran 5). Upbringing in early life is very impactful in the development of personality. If a person knows that he belongs to a caste or class or category that is inferior in status, s/he remains insecure; and this insecurity is further deepened when a person is identified by that status openly. A Brahmin or a Kshatriya will never be ashamed of their caste, but a Dalit will always hesitate to disclose it; even if s/he does not hesitate, the sense of pride is absent in it. There is a crucial psychological implication of this : the caste people always has a sense of belonging in them for their caste, but a dalit, though tagged with a label never wants to belong to it. S/he is born in it, and so this turns out an utter helplessness. This psychology need to be understood because one can’t compete the world with a fragmented personality as half the endeavour required for competition is vested only in coalescing of that personality. With a fractured sense of identity, being and future, a dalit is more in struggle with himself than with the world.

In Introduction to *The Scar* Rajkumar mentions about Ambedkar’s observation: “a dalit in a village does not socialize with others nor is he accepted by others. Despite this fact he considers the village to be his” (xi). This is the irony of a dalit’s life that though he is a part of a village but does not belong to it. Gunasekaran mentions: “whichever village we entered, the first question would be “Who are you?,” and the moment they knew we were Parayars, they would not offer us a drink in a vessel, but would pour it only in the folded palm leaf” (Gunasekaran 20). Though the Constitution of India abolished untouchability, it still forms the stigma in life of dalits in rural areas. “Article-17.” **Abolition of untouchability**-- “Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “Untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.” (*The Constitution of India*) The presence of this article in the constitution has a negligible effect on people whose socialization and acculturation has happened according to the caste stratification. A very common example of a disguised sense of untouchability is the division of villages on base of caste. It is still a common trend that caste people will be concentrated in one part while non-caste in another. Besides, one will find no dalit house in

the vicinity of caste people. And even if a dalit occupies a land near caste people's house, it becomes a matter of great concern for them.

Gunasekaran also writes about the interactions that happened with people of other communities. He mentions about attitude of Muslims towards dalits in Elayankudi: "Caste was never a barrier. And never did they, even after knowing our caste, discriminate us." However, the people in his village were unable to transcend the boundaries of caste. "Whereas in my birth place, Marandai, apart from the tree, the soil and the house that we own, the relationship between living beings is fractured by caste. Caste has divided people into the village and the cheri. In Elayankudi, all people are my relatives. Whereas here, only the tree and the soil are close to me" (Gunasekaran 53-54). Even in cities when a family needs a rented room, flat or house the first question that is asked is, what is your caste?

If we focus on the dialectics of caste we will find that it is not externally planted but inherently and internally developed. Dumont wrote that "To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people, is indispensable to social life" (20). The problem begins with the rigidity of this hierarchy in "varnavyavastha" and with loss of "honour of labour" ("Shramkipratishtha," Bhav 22). The structure still remains the same. "The lower castes on the hand were happy to accept these konars as their masters. This is a type of slavery" (Gunasekaran 36). The caste was associated with religion, and it became the foundation of social life, so much so that no changes could be possible because that was proposed by the divine law. As observed by Dubois: "It is in the nature of the Hindus to cling to their civil and religious institutions, to their old customs and habits... Let us leave them their cherished laws and prejudices, since no human effort will persuade them to give them up, even in their own interests" (97).

That was the reason why the British government never tried to interfere in the social life of Indians. Even this is for sure no other person could have made the provision for "prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth." It is the effect of these constitutional provisions that the physical setup has changed but what remains unaltered is the psychological setup.

Ashis Nandy has referred two forms of colonization: One physical conquest of territory and the other psychological. He states: "Colonialism is also a psychological state rooted in earlier forms of social consciousness in both the colonizer and the colonized. It represents a cultural continuity and carries a certain cultural baggage (Nandy 2). The institution of caste also suggests a form of psychological colonization but here it is differently manipulated. Firstly, the colonizer is not an external agent, it is very much part of the life of the colonized. Secondly the notion of caste-superiority and inferiority are accepted without challenge and they do not remain confined to one generation and they pass on from one generation to another. Thus, colonization in the institution of caste becomes "consensual colonization." It was with this point of view that preamble to the constitution of India states: "Liberty of thought, expression, belief faith and worship" The phrase here "liberty of thought" is very important because caste captures the thought process, and if we doubt the established setup it may introduce a sense of guilt. Therefore, logical and rational thinking is must. And that could be developed only through education.

Education offers greater possibilities of individual's mobility. Even Gunasekaran's mother said : "If you don't study well, having been born a Paraya you would have to go to somebody else's farm, take care of their cattle, be addressed by them without respect and work like a dog for them. If you study you can live in a dignified manner" (81), Ambedkar himself was a great scholar and a man highly devoted to education. It will be momentous to add here an incident: There was a representative of *New York Times* who came to India to take interviews of Indian leaders. They went to Gandhiji at 9:00 pm but by that time he was asleep. Disheartened, they went to Jinnah but he was also asleep. Finally they went to Ambedkar around midnight and they found him studying. They said we went to Gandhi Ji and Jinnah but they were asleep by 9a.m.; almost half the night has past and you are awake. He said: "Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru are asleep because their community is awake—I am awake because my community is sleeping, my society is not awake, it is not aware like other factions of society (Boddh 78). What was Ambedkar doing at mid night? –Studying. He was studying for his people, for their upliftment, to awaken them. He knew that only education can bring awareness, enhance one's morale, and can make a person capable to fight for his rights. Major concern of Ambedkar was to remove "dependency syndrome" and "inferiority complex" from minds of Dalits. He aimed that each human being should be able to get his rightful dignity and honour.

Omvedt quotes Ambedkar:

Coming as I do from the lowest order of the Hindu society I know what is the value of education. The problem of moving the lower order is deemed to be economic. That is a great mistake. The problem of raising the lower order in India is not to feed them, to clothe them and make them serve the higher order as is the ancient idea of this country. The problem of the lower order is to remove from them that inferiority complex which has stunted their growth and made them slaves to others to create in them the consciousness of the significance of their lives for themselves and for the country, of which they have been cruelly robbed by the existing social order. Nothing can achieve this except the spread of higher education.

That's why we see a huge impetus on the part of dalit for education. However, as I mentioned before that education provides greater chance of individual mobility, social mobility may still remain strikingly questionable as far as caste is concerned because caste never changes. Bama reveals: "When I finished my studies and began to look for jobs, I realized that even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn livelihood. Being a Dalit created a problem" (119). Gunasekaran also mentions when dalit gets jobs of doctor, or become a politician they began to gain respect in their work field, but when they return to their village, the same people who respected them in their work place begin to avoid them because of their caste. Raj Gauthaman writes: "Dalits, who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must shout out their selfhood, their "I", when they rise up" (Bama XV). Education instills that sense of "I," and gives courage to accept that "I" belonging to a dalit community, and a feeling that it is no less than "them" (the caste people).

And it is through education that Gunasekaran carves out a distinct place for himself. Ambedkar said: "Don't run behind jobs, get into business." However the sad part attached to it is that "in spite of so many banks and loan facilities, how many of these things reach the poor? Take government schemes for example, they don't reach us. We have to face problems of superstition, corruption, liquor, addictions like that. There is no control on these" (Kamble 154). Again we should recall three famous slogans by Ambedkar :

To educate

To organize

To agitate

Dalit might look antagonistic to upper-caste people, but this is not the case. The antagonism is not directed towards the people it is directed towards the institution of caste. The *Constitution of India* do not aim at giving supremacy to dalits but equality. Likewise, the objective is not to transfer power from one pole to the other but to distribute it between these poles. For the present it will be apt to say that political democracy as given by the constitution is partially realized and for its complete fulfillment there need to be an accomplished economic and social democracy.

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