



Theme of subjugation and emancipation in vadu

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Abstract

The first modern Dalit autobiography in Tamil, Vadu by K.A. Gunasekaran is an account of the caste oppression in the villages of Tamil Nadu, especially in the regions around Elayankudi, the author's hometown in Ramanathapuram. Translated into English by V. Kadambari as *The Scar* in the year 2009, the work shows Gunasekaran growing up as a Parayar in the milieu of and negotiating with three different communities namely Christian, Hindu and Muslim; his facing unforgettable insults as a result of being a 'low' caste, his anger against casteism and the grievously unjust practices of the 'upper' castes, and his empowering himself to get emancipated from these unjust practices thereby sensitizing the readers to the plight of millions of indigenous people all over the country in order to bring about a reform in the society. The autobiography unfolds the deep pain and suffering of Gunasekaran's life from his childhood itself. It is a narrative of pain - the pain arisen out of the womb of a Dalit, and shows to us the scars left by the wounds of untouchability on the mind of the writer. By pointing out his humiliating experiences as a Parayar in vivid detail, Gunasekaran in his autobiography, has tried to draw our attention to the many inhuman caste-born practices to which he was a victim. The various wounds of untouchability and the everlasting scars made thereof in his psyche are clearly documented in his autobiography which also highlights his struggle for a meaningful life, free from the murky lanes of caste-based discrimination. His voice stands for all those people who are depressed and marginalized and kept on the fringes of the society by the elite class.

Keywords: Parayar, untouchability, grief, oppression, emancipation

Introduction

The first modern Dalit autobiography in Tamil, Vadu by K.A. Gunasekaran is an account of the caste oppression in the villages of Tamil Nadu, especially in the regions around Elayankudi, the author's hometown in Ramanathapuram. Translated into English by V. Kadambari as *The Scar* in the year 2009, the work shows Gunasekaran growing up as a Parayar in the milieu of and negotiating with three different communities namely Christian, Hindu and Muslim; his facing unforgettable insults as a result of being a 'low' caste, his anger against casteism and the grievously unjust practices of the 'upper' castes, and his empowering himself to get emancipated from these unjust practices thereby sensitizing the readers to the plight of millions of indigenous people all over the country in order to bring about a reform in the society.

The autobiography unfolds the deep pain and suffering of Gunasekaran's life from his childhood itself. It is a narrative of pain - the pain arisen out of the womb of a Dalit, and shows to us the scars left by the wounds of untouchability on the mind of the writer. According to an eminent scholar, "Gunasekaran's multiple scars are portrayed cleverly or skillfully in this autobiography. They are not the proud medals or revealed sachets; they are the history of an individual and the community" (Patel 322).

In fact, the meaning of the word 'Vadu' is 'the scar' - a mark that is left on the skin after a wound has healed. Gunasekaran, through his autobiography Vadu, passes his pain to his readers by conveying the "lasting impression of grief with which he is left with after unpleasant experiences of caste system" (Rizvi 2). Gunasekaran belonged to the Parayar community which is one of the well-known tribes of Tamilnadu. Kerala, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Karnatka and some part of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji and South Africa. Owing to their Buddhist allegiance and refusal to adopt Brahmanism they were separately distinguished and excommunicated with the rise of Brahminism. The late Bishop Caldwell derived the name Parayar from the Tamil word 'Parai' meaning a drum, as certain Parayars acted as drummers at marriages, funerals, village festivals and on occasions of government or commercial announcements proclaimed also.

In Vadu, Gunasekaran has attempted to portray the exploitation and sufferings of the Parayars through his own life experiences as a member of this community. The incidents and experiences treated in the autobiography are not incidents in one person's life, but incidents in history. The autobiography evokes the mixed culture of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. The narration begins with the author's recollection of the days of his childhood when he and the Muslim people lived together in Elayankudi, a town where people belonging to Marandai-his father's birthplace, Keeranoor-his mother's birthplace and Thovoor-his periamma's birthplace used to come to visit the market-place which was considered the biggest in the whole Ramnathapuram district. He also remembers how he used to hear the naraga and the namaz from the villages which were situated along a single line by a straight road and contained majority of Muslim population.

Gunasekaran's father was a teacher and as the son of a teacher, Gunasekaran was respected by the all Muslim community. He was also given a special access into their homes and mosque. In *The Scar*, he gladly highlights his relationships with Muslims living near his locality, giving a very positive picture of the life-style of Muslims amongst whom he never realized that any caste differences existed:

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 Mami, like they were my own relatives. Caste was never a barrier. And never did they, even after knowing our caste, discriminate us. (53)

Thus, livings among the Muslims, he never had to bear the pangs of being a Parayar or someone belonging to a 'low' caste. However, horrid experiences of discrimination based on the caste-system began in his early-life when he was studying classes six, seven and eight in the school in Elayankudi. Gunasekaran recalls how the cross-eyed headmaster of the school would enter the class during teaching hours with a list in his hand, asking for Parayar or Pallar boys in order to make them fill their scholarship forms in time:

How many in this class are Parayar?' 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 and returned to the office. (5)

On such occasions, the narrator used to feel so pained at having to stand up in front of his friends in the class that even today; the memory of those days makes him sad:

Even now it hurts to think about those times when we had to stand up in front of the others in the class, shrinking and cringing. They would reinforce caste identities by labelling us Pallars, Parayars and Chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was. (5)

Poverty is the cause and perhaps the main paralyzing factor for the sufferings, harassment and oppression of Dalits in our society. And it is also a fact that untouchability and poverty go hand in hand. Gunasekaran tells us that he too had to suffer the sting of poverty as the income of his father was not sufficient to support a large family of six children. The house they lived in was a rented one and many times, they had to shift because of their inability to pay the rent. With a heavy heart, Gunasekaran writes, "I cannot erase the memories of the bitter experiences at rented houses from my mind"(11). Talking about one such house, the author laments, "...this place was not a house. It was meant to be a godown to stock things. It was big, with no walls inside to divide it"(11). In other words, it was a room less house having no partition. Moreover, the roofs of the house were such that they generally gave problems during rainy seasons and they had to place vessels and gunny sack wherever the roof was leaking.

According to the author, the people in those villages were so caste-conscious that the people belonging to Dalit community were neither allowed to enter the temples, nor were they allowed to use the same bathing ghats as the high caste people. The author and his friends were always afraid of taking a dip in an unknown canal because in case it belonged to the upper caste people, they would be severely beaten for using it.

The condition of the Dalit women is described as even worse in these villages. They were the victims of caste as well as patriarchy. So they had to experience the worst form of exploitation. Although Gunasekaran's mother was educated and had got many job offers, yet she was not allowed by her husband to take up a job in spite of their bad economic condition as she had to take care of her children.

Gunasekaran's autobiography portrays various forms of caste and gender oppression the Dalit women were subjected to in those villages. The upper-caste men often set strict and shameful conditions on them which they had to follow in every condition. We, as readers, feel ashamed and horror struck while reading what Gunasekaran's periamma once told him while walking from Thovoor to Elayankudi:

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. (26-27)

Thus the autobiography shows how the Dalits in our society are exploited even beyond the level of exploitation. To put it in the words of Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, "The social system in Hinduism has destroyed the humanity of the Dalits and snatched every kind of right from them. According to it, they are inborn servants of the non-Dalits with whom they cannot afford to be equal because it is against their religion. Therefore, to be born in the Dalit family is to be cursed forever" (6). In fact, Vadu is constructed in the form of wave upon wave, layer upon layer, of memories which disturb his mind whenever triggered through a stimulus in the present. While portraying a dark picture of the reality and the worst kind of difficulties he had to face in creating a world of his own, he does not give up hope and remarks, "There is hope that changes would definitely happen" (39).

The work shows that Gunasekaran was preoccupied with the emancipation not only of his own self, but of the entire Dalit community right from his childhood days. He never let his morale down despite facing the hostile disposition of the so-called upper caste people. In the words of Ali Mojiz Rizvi, "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-throw the caste hierarchy made by the so-called 'high caste' people"(2). Gunasekaran, a struggling personality to come up in life, know very well that education was the only force which could help him and his community to emancipate from the bondages of poverty, oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Expressing his desire and firm determination to get education, Gunasekaran writes, "...I would be oppressed by an anger at failing and inflamed by a desire to study" (15). Although he faced various kinds of caste atrocities during his school and college days, his perseverance, determination and relentless resolution

helped him accomplish degrees in higher education and earned him a reputable place in society. Prejudices and biases could in no way hinder his strenuous journey to emancipation.

During his school days, apart from studies, he used to take part in sports and other extra-curricular activities and always won a prize. Even to win to relay races on sports day, he used to practice hard week before the event. He was a good singer and stood first in most of the inter college singing and acting competitions. When he was doing his graduation, his folk songs were often broadcast by the Trichy All India Radio and before and after the broadcast of his every song, they would announce that the song was sung by the Elayankudi boy K.A. Gunasekaran. Feeling proud of this, Gunasekaran says, "In both my village and college, I had a very good name because of this" (52). When an inter-collegiate competition was conducted to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Madurai University, a representative was sent from each college. He was sent from Dr. Zakir Hussain College of Elayankudi and bagged the first prize in the music competition and the second prize in mono-acting. He was also among the twenty students who were selected for the competition held for Bharathiyar's songs for the colleges in Ramanathapuram district. He was in the first year of B.A. in the Sivaganga Mannar Duraisingam College and at this place, the students were blatantly segregated by their caste. So when he started singing at the competition, the caste boys who identified him started booing loudly. But he kept his calm and started singing amidst the continuous booing, "The people in the first and second rows started listening to me as I continued with the song. They shushed those who were behind them" (67). When he finished his song, there was an enthusiastic clap and the audience was applauding him for his beautiful voice. As his caste had not become a barrier here in the way of his talent, and he was selected for the district level competition he felt much encouraged and enthusiastic. Even at the district level competition, he sang the song with such an intensity that the thunderous claps told that the first prize was undoubtedly his.

Gradually, he became a famous singer and his songs were relayed on the radio with his name attached to Elayankudi as he was announced on the radio as Elayankudi Gunasekaran, "I was called often to sing on the radio. It was as Elayankudi Gunasekaran that I sang most of the folk songs. I was introduced to the public only by that name" (71). Later, he also released many audio albums for which the radio gave him the first encouragement. On the advice of Professor Meera, he joined M.A. Tamil after his graduation and learnt the folk dances Karagam and Kavadi from his professor Om Periyaswami during the first year. The Professor also took him to Delhi in 1981 where he took part in the Republic Day celebrations. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, invited all the artists to dinner at her house. She shook hands with Gunasekaran and advised him to do research in folk arts. The local newspapers published his photographs of shaking hands with Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Dr. S.B. Annamalai sent him to Gandhigram to do a seventy days diploma in folk theatre saying, "Go and learn this art as the ants would collect their food" (79). That is why he was able to become a professor of Theatre. He also got a first class in M.A. Tamil and secured the first rank at the University level in Saiva Siddhanta. All these achievements made him famous both nationally and inter nationally. Thus, as Ali Mojiz Rizvi put it, "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!" (3).

By pointing out his humiliating experiences as a Parayar in vivid detail, Gunasekaran in his autobiography, has tried to draw our attention to the many inhuman caste-born practices to which he was a victim. The various wounds of untouchability and the everlasting scars made thereof in his psyche are clearly documented in his autobiography which also highlights his struggle for a meaningful life, free from the murky lanes of caste-based discrimination. His voice stands for all those people who are depressed and marginalized and kept on the fringes of the society by the elite class. Thus, the autobiography, by calling for Dalit emancipation through education, proves to be an effective agency for social change. It serves as a good platform to create awareness not only among the Dalits, but the entire society, in order to break all the boundaries of caste discrimination and marginalization, and promote an ideology against untouchability.

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