

DECOLONISING THE MIND – K.A. GUNASEKARAN’S INDELIBLE MARK OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines K.A. Gunasekaran’s autobiographical work *The Scar* (Vadu) through the framework of decolonial theory, arguing that systemic emancipation from caste oppression requires decolonising the minds of both the oppressed and the oppressor. The study analyses how *The Scar*, considered the first autobiographical Dalit literature in Tamil, depicts the lived reality of caste discrimination in post-independence Tamil Nadu during the 1950s–1960s. While Gunasekaran advocates education as a pathway to Dalit emancipation, this analysis employs Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s concept of mental decolonisation and Althusser’s theory of interpellation to demonstrate that educational and governmental interventions alone cannot dismantle caste hierarchies. The paper explores how caste identities become internalised through ideological state apparatuses, including scholarship systems and educational institutions that paradoxically reinforce stratification, even through ‘positive discrimination’. Through textual analysis of key episodes throughout the work, violent discrimination, family complicity in oppression, and inherent institutional bias, the research establishes that liberation requires challenging interpellated social identities from both directions. The text functions as protest literature articulating different modes of resistance, yet previous scholarship has not adequately addressed the bilateral nature of required decolonisation. True liberation demands that oppressed communities reject interpellated identities while oppressors relinquish false superiority derived from holding power over communities.

KEYWORDS:

Emancipation, Decolonisation, Caste, Identity, Dalit Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Scar, originally written in Tamil as Vadu by K.A. Gunasekaran, was translated into English by V. Kadambari and published in 2009. It is an autobiographical text about the author's experiences as a person hailing from the "Parayar" caste, one of the Dalit castes from South India. The story is narrated from the author Gunasekaran's perspective and depicts the reality of being a Dalit in a village in Tamil Nadu that still holds onto the caste identity post-independence in the 1950s to 1960s. It reaffirms the reality that Indian villages are both brutal and caste-conscious. As implied by the title of the book, the painful experiences he endured as a Parayar kid affected his psyche and left him with an indelible scar. This text is considered to be the first autobiographical Dalit literature in Tamil and has been accepted as the first one of its kind to give a different kind of narrative on the oppression that the Dalits deal with in Indian Villages. It is essential to read and learn through texts like these that Article 17 of the Indian Constitution has little to no effect on the population and that the only step to remove the impact of caste prejudice is to raise one's level in society through education, which is still not as effective as it should be, ideally. Through his cogent writing style, the author has tried to offer multiple questions that he faced through his life experiences and the solutions that he puts forth that could help with the slow receding of caste-based discrimination in society. One of the alternatives that the writer comes up with for removing the caste hierarchy is emancipation through education, but the identified argument through analysis of the primary text is that decolonising the system through the removal of power from the oppressor or educating the oppressed is not an assured possibility unless the mind of the recipient is decolonised because oppression cannot be sustained only through a material apparatus; the oppressed need to be 'interpellated' into the system.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs textual analysis methodology to examine

K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* through postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks. The primary text serves as the central object of analysis, with the author's autobiographical narrative functioning as both subject and evidence. As an autobiography and bildungsroman by Slaughter's (2007) definition, the text emphasises that increased community education is essential for Dalit emancipation, with the author himself serving as integral to interpretation.

The theoretical framework integrates Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, which addresses how Western canonisation disrupts indigenous knowledge production through false universalism. This concept is applied to analyse how upper castes superimpose hierarchical identities upon Dalit communities, creating quasi-realities perpetuated by the caste system. Additionally, Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation provides analytical tools for understanding how ideologies become internalised to the point where oppressed individuals assume hierarchical identities as their own.

The research methodology involves identifying specific episodes of discrimination, institutional bias, and family complicity within the narrative, then analysing these instances through interpellation and mental colonisation frameworks. The study also reviews existing literature on *The Scar* to identify gaps. Specifically, previous scholarship focuses on articulation modes and educational empowerment but does not adequately address the necessity of bilateral decolonisation. This paper fills that gap by demonstrating that decolonisation requires transformation from both the oppressed and oppressor perspectives.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Institutional Reinforcement and Interpellation of Caste Identity

He was the dean of the School of Performing Arts at Pondicherry University. He was also the director of the International

Institute of Tamil Studies. His growth in life was made possible through education, as his book suggests, but it was not without its struggles. Even today, caste identities go synonymously with admission in many state and central universities across India. The first part of how the caste identities are revealed is through scholarships and the admission process that requires students to conform to their caste hierarchy. The reservation system sometimes works in a way that opposes what it stands for; instead of making the academic process more accessible and more straightforward, it reveals the identity of the students in a provocative atmosphere.

The caste system is so deeply rooted in society that it has permeated even into the Muslim communities in Elayankudi, where they ask about their identities before giving someone water. Even though the government provides multiple schemes to remove this bias, as mentioned earlier, it tends to make it more difficult for the Dalit students in the novel. “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).” This is one of the many examples from the text wherein a society where untouchability is outlawed, as soon as one’s caste identity is revealed, even students in a school practice hierarchical differences. The author writes of this experience lucidly because this is his first experience of caste stratification.

Another example of stratification that comes because of government-appropriated schemes is the Harijan Hostel scheme, where those who stayed in the hostel were ordered not to promulgate any information whatsoever about the place, as most of the welfare ideals were not being met, and anyone who got fungal infections or any health problems were instructed to go to their homes until they recovered. Ngũgĩ’s *Decolonising the Mind* primarily speaks about the process of how western canonisation disrupts the knowledge

production process of indigenous communities in the guise of a false universalism, and it can be applied to this context also where the students of a Dalit background subside to the lower end of the hierarchy because of the caste identity and its place in societal order that was superimposed on them by the higher castes which gain a false sense of superiority by holding power over these communities which are not originally the part of the varnas. K.A. Gunasekaran's character questions these quasi-realities that are perpetuated by the caste system while being the victim and never getting a direct answer for why his identity is not equal to a higher caste, like a Konar or Maravar.

Another example of the multiple facets of life led by different sects in Elayankudi is when the author explains the life he led there as a 'Parayar' boy, facing discrimination day in and day out, and the Muslims who lived there, who led lives like upper-caste people. It is reiterated multiple times how caste is a very fluid subject that is almost non-existent in one part of the village with a Muslim population, while the adjacent village with Hindus is plagued with caste ideologies with untouchability practised towards the Parayars, Chakkiliyars in particular. Ngūgĩ, while talking about imperialism and cultural bomb, refers to it as a crime against an indigenous community. "The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environments, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (Bharathiraja, 2011). Here, the Muslim communities have successfully decolonised the indigenous Hindu caste beliefs by introducing their own faith into the mainstream, thereby alienating the stratification of communities, so in technicality, used a cultural bomb against the upper-caste dominant society of Elayankudi, using colonial measures to decolonise the minds of the people. This results in a place where the author inadvertently feels more welcome and even considers converting to Islam or Christianity to keep discrimination at bay. "I have experienced harassment in the name of caste and have often

thought about converting to Islam” (Mangalam, 2017). This is a valid example of how conversion works or is thought to work in terms of the lower stratum of Hindu society.

K.A. Gunasekaran counts many violent acts of discrimination he faced throughout his life in the village as a ‘Parayar’ boy, about which, when he questioned his family, they simply justified it as their place in society as ‘Parayars.’ Once, when he is sent to Keeranoor to buy oil by his grandmother, he comes across a Maravar who slaps him for no reason, to which his grandmother simply says that Gunasekaran should move eight feet away if a higher caste person comes his way. This is not the only instance where the author faces such a circumstance. There is also a part where he chases after an upper-caste boy who refuses to pay for the purchased items at K.A. Gunasekaran’s shop in front of the Thovoor school. The author unwittingly chases him to his house, which enrages the upper-caste people, so that they show up with a violent nature outside his aunt’s home late in the night to hurt his person, while his family falls to their feet and explains that he did not know the ways of the village, instead of defending the actions of Gunasekaran.

These instances prove how reinforcements from both sides of the spectrum feed the caste system’s persistence. Louis Althusser (1918–1990) coined the term interpellation to describe the process by which ideas suffuse our minds and affect our lives to the point where they become so ingrained in who we are that we automatically assume they are our own. Interpellation is the process by which we come into contact with and assimilate the ideals of our culture. According to Althusser, interpellation functions similarly to shouting out to someone in the street or giving them a name. In other words, ideologies “address” people by presenting them with a specific identity that they are urged to accept. The interpellation of their social identity, which the upper castes gave to them, has entirely won over these Parayars in these scenarios, which K.A. Gunasekaran questions instinctively, because had they shown solidarity against the upper castes, it might have forced them out of their misery.

3.2 Pathways to Liberation and Persistent Hegemony

While K.A. Gunasekaran's text has been studied alongside other subaltern texts such as Bama's *Kurukku* and Luxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*, this paper has looked into how decolonising the system, unless traversed from both sides, will not stand for any value. Gunasekaran being denied entry into the stream of arts and culture because of his identity, his being denied of sharing equal space with an upper-caste person in the village, his growth into an honourable member of society through education stand for the amount of hardships a Dalit should undergo just to reach the same platform as an upper-caste individual. Gunasekaran's character is the only one who questions why there is unjust treatment against them, while his own family simply accepts their fate against the violence by the upper castes. "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. (Gunasekaran, 2009)." The author's questioning of such situations, though it might have arisen from a point of ignorance of the village customs, is the ideal mindset towards decolonising the caste hierarchy.

The most significant issue facing Dalits is poverty. People used to only pay them a pitiful sum for the labour they accomplished because of their dire financial situation. Even Gunasekaran worked in weeding out farmlands and catching snails. Only when there is a festival do all of the family members eat decently. While K.A. Gunasekaran was able to bypass this through education and relentless hard work, it should be easier for these communities to access education. The Dalit, or 'Untouchable,' is a government employee, a politician, or a teacher in a public school. He rarely holds a position in the higher judicial branch or is a renowned attorney, businessman, or journalist. According to Sagarika Ghosh, a Dalit's freedom only exists in certain areas, such as politics and the administrative positions he holds as a result of state policy. This is also true in this instance, where Gunasekaran is appointed dean of

Pondicherry University, a highly esteemed institution that is still a part of the educational system. Education consistently proved to be the best place to start when changing a character because the identity ties it to change it from the fundamental aspects, upward from down. Education could widely help these communities to go past the Ideological State Apparatuses that are rigged against them.

Intercaste marriages, according to Gunasekaran, will contribute to the development of a casteless society. However, convincing members of higher castes to accept a lower caste member as kin is extremely difficult. He describes the challenges faced by intercaste marriages, which he has personally witnessed. He describes the difficulties that Michael Amma, a fictional character, faced as a result of her inter-caste union. The person she loved was a member of the Udayar community (upper caste), whereas she belonged to the Pallar community (lower caste). When the parents found out about the relationship, they arranged for Michael Amma to become engaged to one of their community men, which in turn offended the man she was in love with, leading him to brutally murder her. Decolonial measures, such as social justice for women in general, need to be implemented to bring these instances to light. The author also talks about the precarious lives of Dalit women through such instances and also with situations involving his mother's presence.

In protest against the caste system and inequality that are pervasive in Hindu society, the autobiography is written in the style of a protest. Gunasekaran reveals that many forms of entry limitations put on Untouchables are based on keeping Untouchables who contaminate the space out of sight of high-caste people. He illustrates how upper-caste residents' homes and neighbourhoods are off-limits to Dalits. The autobiography describes how Brahminical control transformed the Dalit body into a cultural arena. The hegemony persists even without the Brahmin caste in the equation; without the Brahmins, the Konars take the top place in the hierarchy, or the Maravars instead, and they continue to misuse their power over the Dalits. "The writer does not satisfy himself by

merely penning down the fragments of his memory in a documentary mode, rather he reconstructs them to let his readers have a new perspective on the old one. His mode of articulation is different from others.” (Mishra, n.d.).

4. CONCLUSION

The persistence of the caste system’s hierarchy in itself makes this setting postcolonial, and to decolonise the setting, the mind of the oppressed needs to be decolonised along with the oppressor. “It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do: then we become part of those millions whom Martin Carter once saw sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world.” (Thiong’o 1998). As Ngũgĩ rightly points out in terms of African decolonisation, the same can be applied to the struggle of the Dalits, their strongest unifying force, and no matter what path they take towards emancipation, be it education, violence or protest, they should not forego the cultural memory of their struggles that they have gone through. It is the first step towards liberation and decolonising the mind, and everything else will follow.

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