

HOMELESSNESS IN HOMELAND: ANALYSIS OF EXPLOITATION OF DALITS IN K.A. GUNASEKARAN'S *THE SCAR*

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Abstract

Dalit literature is an important part of Indian literature. Dalit literature appeared to the forefront after 1960, starting with Marathi, followed by Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages. It came in the form of self-narratives like poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies which are known for their realism and for its contribution to Dalit politics. It was a movement to bring about a change. It acts as a vehicle to project the problems and sufferings that subalterns had to undergo over the years. On certain grounds, it is very close to African-American literature especially in its depiction of issues like racial segregation and injustice as often noticed in slave narratives.

'Subalterns', the primary focus of my paper, are people who are socially, politically and geographically out of the hegemonic power structure. They are people who have been facing a lot of problems and that is very much prominent if we go back to our own history. The scar is an autobiography by K.A Gunasekaran (Director of the International Institute of Tamil Studies) who narrates his experience of caste oppression and prejudice prevalent in the villages of Tamil Nadu. This is just another example of caste oppression and discrimination in our own Indian society which proudly calls itself 'independent'. Dalit literature brings forth the bitter truth and reality of our own respective societies. The time has come when we should be aware of it and put in our efforts to make this world a better place to live in.

Introduction

In the postcolonial dialectic, “subaltern” or “underclass” occupies a prominent place which incorporates the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any office, or in any other way. It is the subject position that defines subalternity. Even when it operates in terms of class, age and gender, it is more psychological than physical. Deprivation, alienation, and subordination, resignation, silence, and neglect mark the lives of the subaltern and even when they resist and rise up, they feel bound and defeated by

their subject positions. They have no representatives in society which they live in and so helplessly suffer and get marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture, of which they are an essential part.

Subalterns are people whom history failed to provide space for. History remembers only kings and emperors and not the soldiers who fought for their victory. Subalterns are everywhere but one cannot see them because they don't have any identity. One can trace their uprising then and there in the pages

of history but they are very few and far between. They are just dolls and dance to the tunes of elites. Subalterns are there in every society, developed, developing and under developed. Subaltern studies in India gained ground after 1970's and 1980's. It was largely associated with such movements which happened in Latin American and African countries. People like Guha, Spivak, Mahasweta Devi, Asok Sen, Gautam Bhadra, Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Pandey and many others contributed to it by their various literary and seminal works.

The dalits in India are the subalterns as they are the downtrodden group who are marginalised. Indian society is divided into three broad 'social' categories: the caste communities, the outcaste communities and the indigenous people. The outcaste communities and the indigenous people are referred to in the Indian Constitution respectively as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The term 'Scheduled Castes' refers to anyone who falls beneath the four caste communities: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras which are established on the basis of Varna system, an ancient cosmic-moral scheme of fixed categorisation. The precise origins of caste and untouchability are unclear – shrouded in myth and history. However, the development of the caste system and the practice of untouchability are generally ascribed to the (disputed) Aryan invasion of India around 1500 BC.

Previously known as the 'untouchables', SCs nowadays refer to themselves as 'Dalits' meaning 'broken' or 'oppressed'. They make up about 20 % of the Indian population and still suffer from social and religious exclusion and economic exploitation by the upper castes. They are among the poorest of India's poor. The dalits are discriminated because they do not belong to the hierarchy formulated in the Varna system and they are poor and downtrodden. They do menial jobs such as manual scavenging, carcass cleaning, rope-makers, leather-workers and plantation labourers. They are illiterates. Over centuries till date the dalits have been marginalised, pushed to the periphery, looked down upon by the

upper castes and the oppression and the various abuses on them have been atrocious.

Home is a word that symbolizes happiness, peace, love and equality. Unfortunately, the dalits in India are homeless in their homeland, in the sense, they are deprived of social, economic, religious and political stands. Their constant struggle against the deep-rooted caste system and their urge to belong to the center is evident. Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the person responsible for the Indian Constitution was a dalit and he had struggled to eradicate discrimination of dalits. Ambedkar was the first dalit leader of India. In this capacity he is almost an enigma: how did he drag himself away from his social background to acquire this standing and become a genuine statesman? Certainly, he had the advantage of an extraordinary mind and an iron will: he could channel all his energy in the service of a wider project and his determination never failed him. Ambedkar was the heir to a regional tradition, his struggle harked back to the anti-Brahmin movements which emerged in western Maharashtra from the mid 19th century onwards.

In order to bring about a social change and also to press the need for social equality where the dalits would be treated equals, many writers and activists emerged. Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Eleanor Zelliott, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Sharankumar Limbale, Joseph Macwan, Omprakash Valmiki and many other writers started writing in the form of essays, poetry and life narratives (autobiography) so that the social change (homeland) is achieved by the homeless dalits. Dalit literature is not simply literature but is associated with a movement to bring about a change. The Dalit Panthers Movement emerged in the year 1970 following the already flourishing Black Panthers Movement established by the Afro-Americans. The Dalit Panthers Movement paved way for so many Marathi dalit activists to assert themselves so as to bring about the much needed change in the society.

Ambedkar in his book 'The Annihilation of Caste'

addresses the dalits not to give up hope and urges the dalit masses to educate, agitate, eradicate this social evil (caste system). The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. K.A. Gunasekaran is a teacher, folk-artist, dramatist and researcher. He was born a dalit and through his autobiography *The Scar* expresses his struggles against this caste ridden society. This paper would analyse the various instances from the above mentioned text by K.A. Gunasekaran and how the dalits are homeless in their homeland.

Content

Growing up as a boy from the Paraya caste, in the milieu of christian, hindu and muslim communities, K.A. Gunasekaran narrates the familiar tale of caste oppression and prejudice prevalent in the villages of Tamilnadu. As the narrative unfolds, it is evident that the 'low' caste negotiates with the three religious communities. The deep pain of the Paraya surfaces through the risible anecdotes that ridicule the grievously unjust practices of the 'upper' castes. This analysis provides insight into how the dalits are homeless in their homeland.

'How many in the 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 and return to the office.' 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 labeling us Pallars, Parayars, and Chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was. Even then, Muslim boys had little awareness about Hindu caste divisions. (The Scar, 5)

The caste system discriminates the 'lower' caste from the 'upper' caste and the students who belong to the dalit communities were hurt due to this. Mahatma

Gandhi termed the dalits as harijans but these so called God's Children are not given their due. Though they belong to this country, they are still marginalised and this shows how they are homeless in their homeland.

During my high school days, our father enrolled my brother Karunanidhi and me in the Harijan hostel for he could not afford our education. (*The Scar*, 6)

The dalits in India are poverty stricken and they cannot afford to educate their children. The dalits live in such a horrible state that they cannot afford even food, clothing or shelter and the basic amenities. This is the result of many dalits forcing themselves to work as menial labourers and this is another instance where the dalits are Homeless in their Homeland when it comes to lack of education.

*I have already narrated the ordeal of getting the scholarship form at the school. To get the signature of the headman and the karnam was very difficult. If we go looking for him at Marandai, the karnam would be in Sethur. The headman in Sethur would all of a sudden adjourn to Elayankudi. It was difficult to even see them. If they saw us in the village they would ask us to tie up their cattle, dig out a canal, etc., and only then would they sign the forms. Father would feel frustrated every time he had to approach them for their signatures. 'It's' horrid, the way they display their caste superiority before they sign anything', (*The Scar*, 9)*

The dalits have to slog day and night for their livelihood. They are treated very badly and also made to wait to receive their own rights. In the above passage the 'upper' caste people simply do not bother about their needs. They are made to work like dogs in order to persuade the headman to sign their scholarship forms. They are deprived of their human rights and this exhibits how they are homeless in their homeland when it comes to the treatment of dalits.

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 the hindus were. (The Scar, 12)

Dalits in India do not want to reveal their caste identity because the dalits feel secure that way and are not oppressed which is so true of hinduism. This shows how ridiculous it is for a dalit to reveal his original identity so as to escape the brunt of caste exploitation. This is an instance of how the dalits are homeless in their homeland when it comes to revealing their true identity.

The moment we reached Kaloorani the smell of sweet palm wine would waft in the air. The air was redolent with the heady scent of the making of palm sugar. We would stop near the Sannar settlements and ask them for Pathaneer. For five or ten paise we would get pathaneer in a bowl made out of palm leaves. 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. (The Scar, 20)

Parayars is a Dalit caste. They are marginalised and secluded by the 'upper' caste. The Sannars are 'upper' caste people. The protagonist is a Paraya and the nearby villagers find out from the boys their caste. If they are identified to be dalits they would not offer the drink in a vessel but in a folded palm leaf. Even in the present in some parts of the country 'Two Tumbler System' exists. Muhammad Ali, the Black American boxer won a Gold Medal in the Olympics but when he returned to his native town Louisville, he was not allowed to dine in a restaurant. Likewise the dalits are discriminated and this is an instance of how they are homeless in their homeland.

While walking down the road we would see sugarcane fields on either side. Feeling thirsty we would crouch near the Thovoor

canal and drink water by scouring it with both hands. We would be very, very careful about not disturbing the water. Otherwise the water would become muddy and smelly. We did not know to which caste this canal belonged. 'If it belongs to the upper caste we would be tied to a tree and beaten. So run', we would say to each other and take to our heels. Even sedately running water would intimidate us, in the name of caste, in the villages surrounding Elayankudi. (The Scar, 20-21)

The dalits are not allowed to bathe or wash clothes or drink water from the 'upper' caste wells, canals and rivers. If they do so then it is considered as an act of polluting and they would be brutally punished. The fact that they are dalits makes them tremble even if they have to think of drinking water. This is another anecdote which projects the plights of the homeless dalits in their homeland.

Some of my father's students who had been to Malaysia and Singapore gave us three or four shirts or t-shirts as gifts. I do not remember my father wearing any of those. He would sell what was given to him as gift for fifteen rupees or so in Pullappan's shop. He would use that money to buy rice and pulses for the house.... I don't remember my father ever buying new clothes for us. We have never bought fish as I have seen Muslims buy them. (The Scar, 22)

The condition of the dalits is so pitiable that they cannot afford to wear neat clothes. They are in a position to think only of food and feeding their stomachs rather than enjoying things. They do not have money to buy fish or meat and all that they can afford is rice and pulse. Meat is a rarity. They have no happiness but a worn some life filled with distress and agony. They feel homeless in their homeland when it comes to happiness and materialism.

If a dalit enters an 'upper' caste street, it is considered polluting the streets and a great sin. They do not approve of this. They would be simply abused. If the dalit enters an 'upper' caste person's house it is considered arrogant as he has overstepped his limitations. His hands and feet would be tied and he would be brutally abused. There are many people who love pet animals and birds but if a dalit enters the street and house then it is a sign of disrespect and arrogance. This instance projects the exploitation of dalits and also goes on to stress the homelessness in their homeland. This is clearly evident in:

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. (The Scar, 26)

The dalits have to undergo so much abuse verbally, physically and psychologically as well. Some dalits think it is their fate to be born as dalits. They are termed as 'casteless fellows', 'bad caste' and so on. Women were not allowed to wear blouse. The dalit women who live in Cheri (Slums) are not allowed to wear a blouse as this was the regulation of the caste system of the village. They are held by the dominance of the 'upper' caste and this annoys them as it deprives of their right. This shows how homeless they are in their homeland:

Casteless fellows, fellows belonging to bad caste,...' '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.

(The Scar, 26)

In the Cheri every Paraya house and the Chakiliyar house, would have an upper-caste master. There would be no day when

they would not talk about 'our master's house'. When I think about it now I feel it was a kind of slavishness.

(The Scar, 28)

The above quote shows how dalits are merely slaves in the hands of the 'upper' caste masters. Each of the dalit belonging to various sub-castes work under an upper-caste master and there is not a single day that these dalit people end their day without talking about their masters. It seems as though they are slaves who have to think about their masters and be at their service all through. This slavishness under the clutches of the upper caste masters is another account of how they are homeless in their homeland.

They had gone out of their hometowns mainly to escape the oppression of the upper caste. If they had stayed on they would have had to do as they were bidden. And their artistry would be written off as service to the village. It was generally slavish work without recompense.

(The Scar, 35)

Here is an instance in which the dalits migrate or leave their hometowns to the city areas where caste oppression is not at all prevalent and this migration is mainly to escape from the oppression of the upper caste people. They do not earn a livelihood and their work is considered as service to the village. They are mere slaves who are forced to work for a long period of time without any wages. This shows how they are puppets in the hands of the upper caste masters and goes on to show their homelessness in their homeland.

'Even if we elope, your people will destroy my parents and my entire clan. Forget me and marry a girl in your own caste and live in peace', said Michael Amma. The next moment she was hacked to death with a sickle...ever since that murder, there has been no inter caste marriage in that area.... 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 a 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 couple who lived in the town and finish them off quietly. (The Scar, 37-39)

According to Hindu scriptures and customs, inter caste marriages are forbidden. It is considered against the laws of the religion. And marrying a Dalit is a mean and a shameful act. If, ever an upper caste person wants to marry a Dalit, the Dalit will be killed. Even if the Dalit rejects the idea of getting married to the upper caste person still the Dalit would be killed. They will have to escape from the village and live in a city or town without the knowledge of the upper caste people who are fastidious in safeguarding this caste hierarchy. Sometimes, the elop couple would be searched for and both would be killed. This is the harsh reality that they are to face in their homeland and shows the plight of the homeless dalits.

One can cross this village only after declaring one's caste to those men. Then we could have to deal with their dogs. From Valayanoor, there is a very good road leading to Keeranoor. But the road is meant to be used only by the higher caste. There is another path full of dirt and thorns, that's the one that leads to the Keeranoor cheri. I've never gone to my birthplace through the good road. (The Scar, 41)

When the dalits have to leave their own village for any other place, they will have to pronounce their caste as the dalits were not allowed to walk or travel through the roads laid for the upper caste people to travel. The road that the upper caste people travelled was very good whereas the dalits had to travel through a dirty and thorn ridden road. This shows how the dalits are homeless in their homeland even in the smallest of ways.

Life for the dalits has never changed. They lived in utter poverty and agony of the oppression that the upper caste meted loud to them. The tag that a dalit carries is shameful and it remains forever and this keeps haunting them always. They were treated kindly by the muslims but the hindus looked down upon them and discriminated them and sometimes treated them worse than animals. Here:

'Just because I was born here you ask me to identify myself with Marandai. I was born here, but grew up in Elayankudi. The Elayankudi Muslims are 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. Whereas in my birthplace, 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. How can I mention Marandai on the radio when I share no ties with the people here? That is why I call myself on the radio as Elayankudi Gunasekaran. For me that seems to be the right thing to do. I played, studied and had friends only in Elayankudi. It is difficult for me to think of Marandai as my place since I have never been given access to the upper caste streets in the village,' I said, explaining to him my stance. He on the other hand tried to escape criticism by saying, 'Unless, many things change, Marandai would not be as you want it to be.' (The Scar, 53-54)

The dalits are homeless in their homeland and this is a long awaited longing that they search for their home in this deep rooted caste prone homeland.

The college used to remain closed interminably due to caste fights now and then. On those occasions I used to take money from Meera sir to go to my place. Most of the boys, belonging to the dalit community, will not have money....The very look of the temple used to scare me. Every time I went into the temples which had a gopuram, my heart would race with fear as I wondered whether they would allow a low caste into the temple.

(The Scar, 70-89)

The dalits always faced taunts and abuses from the upper caste students. Due to this the college remained closed for a long time and many dalit students who stayed in hostels would not be able to go to their native places due to lack of money. This shows how economically downtrodden they are. Sometimes the very thought of entering a temple haunts a dalit because dalits were not allowed to enter into the temples. This fear has become a part of dalit thought and the idea of Homeland is a day dream and a mirage in the desert.

Conclusion

The dalits have to fight against these atrocious exploitations meted out to them by the so called upper

caste communities. The only way to transform this mirage into an oasis is by educating the minds of people (both the so called upper caste people and the dalits) as the need is change of mindset. Scar most importantly focuses at emancipation and dalit assertion which is impossible without education. K.A Gunasekaran has made an effort to give voice to the voiceless and is appealing us through his autobiography to think beyond these petty discriminations. This autobiography bears ample testimony to the fact that wounds made by fire might heal but wounds made by untouchability, discrimination and caste oppression would continue to ache. Even today in the newspapers, magazines and journals a lot of atrocious crimes and murders are reported and the Dalits are to bear the brunt of this unstoppable, mean act. The dalit writers through dalit literature in the form of life narratives, poetry, essays and short story should throw more insights to eradicate this deep rooted Caste System so that the homeless regain their lost Home. Periyar, E V Ramaswamy, a social Activist staged a protest walking all the way from Tamilnadu to a particular place in Kerala (Vaikkam) to fight for the dalits to enter into the temple. There is a need for Social change and this can happen only if the dalits are given their due rights of food, clothing, shelter, education and equality in the social strata.

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