

Review Article

ADDRESSING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL EXCLUSION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GUNASEKARAN'S VADU (SCAR)

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Abstract

Gunasekaran's Vadu(Scar), an autobiography, explores caste domination, suppression, inequality, caste conflicts that made the Dalit undergo a socio-cultural alienation. His autobiography mainly focuses on how inequality plays a major role in the society and makes the society the dominant and the dominated. The paper deals with how the author reveals the exclusion and alienation he and his community experienced and how the socio-cultural exclusion imposed by the caste –hindus is questioned back.

Keywords: Caste domination, Suppression, Inequality, Exclusion

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INTRODUCTION

History has no proof of the existence and identity of the Dalit people. It is because of this obscurity, Dalits write their history glorifying their culture in a more elegant manner. Autobiography, being considered the personal narrative of the Dalits, is the consequence and result of their deep longing to establish their social history through their personal life story.

Autobiography is one of the powerful genres for the Dalits to establish their identity through literature. These autobiographies are published in many Indian languages and also are translated into English. Autobiographies of Narendra Jadhav's *Out Caste* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Vasanth Moon's *Vasti*(1985), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*(1997), Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalaya* (1998), Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Bahiah*(2011), Urimila Pawar's *Aaidan* (2003), Bama's *Karakku*(1992), Sangati(1994), Babay Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*(2008), Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*(1992), D.P.Das's *The Untouchable Story*(1985), Hazari's *Untouchable*(1970), Shantabai Kamble's *Maya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*(1990), Kumud Pawar's *Antaspot*(1981), Shyamal's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*(2001), Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the IAS*(1997), Josiane Racine and Jean-Luce Racing's *Viramma*(1997), have been translated not only into English but also into various European languages. The autobiographies of Aravind Malagatti and Siddhalingayya, written in Kannada, are at present translated into English. These translations have created a special place for Dalit literature at the global level.

We do see difference of opinion among the critics about their response to Dalit literature. Some feel it is making an indelible mark at the global level while others look at it with disdain as a liberal strategy to convert the Dalit plight into assets. (*Touchable Tales*, 2003) Moreover, autobiography as a literary genre has been used widely across the world by the persecuted as an effective tool to project themselves. Despite the campaign about the death of the author by the Post-Structuralists, autobiographies continue to be written.

In India, Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasan are the forerunners of the Dalit autobiography. Their autobiographies have in fact come out as precise notes. Both autobiographies seem to have been written in 1939. In fact the last note in

Ambedkar's autobiography gives a detailed account of an incident that happened in 1938, thereby proving that the compilations must have been brought out after that. Rettaimalai Srinivasan's *Jeeviya Saritira Surukkam (A Brief Autobiography)* was published by Pyne & co, Madras, in 1939.

According to Ambedkar, foreigners do know that the stigma called untouchability is in vogue in India. But they do not know how gruesome it is. Ambedkar further observed, a Dalit in a village does not socialise with others nor is he welfare of these people is not without self-interest; and also to make clear the fact that this community of people have achieved whatever they have by their own struggle.'

We cannot classify all the autobiographies that are written by the Dalits all over India as akin to Ambedkar's or Rettaimalai Srinivasan's writings. However, in all the Dalit autobiographies certain elements that are found in the above two pioneering works can be seen. In Dalit autobiographies, one can see the most inhumane aspects of untouchability. Therefore, it can be affirmed that these autobiographies augment the movement against untouchability.

Arjun Dangle points out that Dalit literary activities were taken up in Marathi, much before the Ambedkar movement started. He mentions among the many writers, Gopal Baba Walanker, Pandit Kondiram and Kishan Bagoji Banchoth who have made significant contribution even as early as 1920. (*Dalit Ilakiyam*, 1992) K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* makes its appearance against this background. It talks about his life upto his graduation. Not only is it a record of his experiences, but it is also a documentation of a certain time. When talking about his father, a school teacher, struggling to give him an education; or his mother who had studied upto the middle school even in those days, but nevertheless had to take up jobs like issuing tickets at the cinema theatre, chopping firewood and cutting grass to support the family; or about how he and his siblings contained hunger by eating soaked tamarind seeds for breakfast, Gunasekaran's language touches the depths of one's heart without in the least evoking pity. We do not see in Gunasekaran's language the anger of the language of Namdeo Dhasal, who wished 'to copulate with hunger'. Nevertheless, his language instills that anger in the reader.

The autobiography evokes a mixed culture of Hinduism, Islam

and Christianity. We do not see the rituals, habits and customs,

There are two important issues related to the form called autobiography. It is not only a testimony but also an appeal by the victim. The Dalit autobiographies would not remain the same if they were to take up a judgemental role. Autobiographies are usually truthful and trustworthy. They try to offer human life as a linear narrative - the present written word trying to capture the past history. They are conceived in the language of adventure highlighting the achievements of an individual, whereas a literary work is an adventure of language. This is the second problem related to an autobiography.

An autobiography can transcend these two limitations to become a literary piece in itself. In order to do so, a conscious effort is required. According to Foucault, a work of art should be an experiment conducted on one's self. Why do we write a book? The first reason is our interest in knowing new things. The second is the transformation that we bring on ourselves through writing. These words show the way to transform an autobiography into a literary piece:

It was in Salaiyur that Father started his career as a teacher and brought them up too. The Siva Temple in Elayankudi lay in that part of the city where the Arya Vysyas lived in large numbers. He has never been inside this temple even today. But he has often touched the four feet stone figure of Ammanavayan, sitting cross-legged in front of this temple.

His parents had three sons and three daughters. His mother had been educated, even in those days, up to eighth standard at the Schwartz School in Ramanathapuram. In Keeranoor, where his mother was born, there was a church for Dalits. His mother received education through the church sponsorship. His father was against the wife taking up a government job. It appears that in those days there was lack of awareness for the Red Triangle. Having had half-a-dozen children, his father found it difficult to manage the house with his salary alone. Despite this, he came to know much later that he had another wife in Marandai with whom he had one son and two daughters. His parents did not encourage all of them going out together, fearing the teasings of their neighbours. Nevertheless some Muslim neighbours would make fun of them, as the staircase of the upper house' as we were born one after the other, with very little age gap. Often his father used to quarrel with Mother, mainly due to his poverty. Mother would then bundle her things and say, 'Come, let us go to my mother's place', and would make them walk to Keeranoor. After two or three days, Father would come and plead with Mother saying, 'The children's education is getting spoilt' and would take them back to their home.

During the re-opening of the school, each year, his father would ask some affluent Muslims to contribute towards the cause of their education. They would buy them text-books and notebooks, and even paid their school fees. The father earned the respect, even though they helped him. They would invite him into their homes saying, 'Come teacher, sit. Have some tea.' his father too would please them with a salaam whenever he saw them.

There were about fifty Muslim families and a mosque in Karunchutti. Even if they asked a Muslim household for water, they too would ask them, 'Who are you?' before they offered them water. In Elayankudi and Salaiyur one was never asked this question. He asked his brother Karunanidhi, 'Why is it that the Muslims in this village alone ask about our caste and then make us drink water with our cupped hands?' He said, 'The Muslims here are surrounded by many other castes like Saanar, Konar, etc. They must have learnt from them. That is why these people are also aware of caste.' From these incidents they felt very sad to be human as well as feeling helpless.

The people belonging to the Thovoor cheri would never sleep much of the nights, even a month before the harvest festival. Men would weave winnows and women would make boxes of all kinds and shapes with the palmyra leaves. All these people would say that they were making boxes for their parent's house or mats for their relatives' houses. On the harvest festival day they would take all that they had been making for over a month

- mats, winnows, boxes, baskets, etc., to the land owners' houses. In return they would be given money, new vettis, sarees, towels, etc., along with the new rice that would have been cooked that day.

In the cheri every Paraya (schedule caste) house and the Chakiliyar (schedule caste) house, would have an upper-caste master. There would be no day when they would not talk about 'our master's house'. When he think about it now He feels it was a kind of slavishness. His periamma would give him mats and new boxes, along with one old box and tell him, 'On the banks of the canal, is our master's house amidst the tamarind trees... Just go and stand there. If they ask you who you are, just tell them that you are Arulai's younger sister's son. They would give you newly cooked rice in the old box. Take it and give them these new mats and boxes.' he would do as she said and on the way back pick out the cashews, raisins, etc., in the sweet rice in the box. Then he would start eating the rice little by little till he reached home. The mats, winnows and boxes that are made by these people would be used by their masters. When he thinks of this now, he understand it to be a kind of exploitation by the upper caste people.

Announcing deaths used to be referred to as 'carrying "news" to the villages'.

The keening began with, 'Hey you guys! Haven't you taken the news to the villages?' If anyone died in the upper caste households, the local people from the cheri will have to carry the news to their relatives in other villages. The messenger was left unpaid for this service. But the person who received the news would offer to give a measure of paddy, which was accepted as a wage.

Many people from the cheri would set out in different directions by walk carrying the news. They had to reach various places on the same day; it was imperative that the news of grief should reach all to ensure their presence at the funeral. In those days there was no bus facility and one had to walk.

He has also gone with Maduraiveeran and Balu carrying news from the grief stricken households to places which were within eight kilometre distance like, Viradhakandan, Sockkapaddappu, Anandur, Vadathirukai, Alavidanga, etc. They would sell the paddy given to them in these villages at the small shops in the same place, and buy all kinds of things to eat. The money that is left over would often be used to watch a movie at Salaigramam, Paramakudi and Anandur. They were quite adept at delivering this death news to the relatives. They would announce, 'So and so in Thovoor has passed away and the funeral will be at the early hours the next day.' The moment such news was conveyed the woman folk would start lamenting and crying. They would declare that they were on their way to the next village, and they would give them the paddy. They would hold out their towels and they would tip the measure of grain into it. Depending on the closeness of the relationship with the dead, the number of measures of paddy would increase or decrease.

Some houses would offer them rice, porridge or gruel. If anyone invites them to eat they would first ask for a sickle to cut the palmyra leaf and make a bowl for themselves. Not a drop would leak from Maduraiveeran's bowl. He got an opportunity to travel to many places and visit many villages while carrying the news about the death. They would pick up tender palmyra fruits, cucumbers, brinjals, palm fruits, etc., as they walked from place to place. Then only would they proceed to those houses where they had to deliver the news.

During Christmas, they would stage plays in the church at Thovoor. The church was built for the people of the cheri. Minardas, Balraj and Arpudam anna would take charge of the church festival. Once they had arranged for loudspeakers to play the songs. A particular song was played again and again. The Thovoor chairman, Madavan, wanted the person responsible for the prank to be brought to him. Minardas owned up to the prank and went to see him. Apart from the Pallans, Parayars and the Chakiliyars, there were only the Konars and Udayars in Thovoor. In fact the Konars were more in number. The cinema song - 'O joyous Konar, who went

bankrupt of his intelligence' - was the reason for the problem.

'If it is a festival for the birth of Christ why don't you have devotional songs on Jesus? Are you trying to irritate us with the songs that ridicule the Konars? If you do so once again, things are going to become pretty bad for you,' warned the chairman.

The young men in the cheri on the other hand felt the Konars who constantly displayed their caste arrogance deserved it. The day would break every morning in the cheri with their arrogant voices calling the lower castes to work in their fields. The lower castes on the other hand were happy to accept these Konars as their masters and would proudly refer to 'my master's house' and 'your master's house' in their conversations. This is a type of slavery.

He will tell us the story of Michael Amma. She was from the Pallar community. The boy was a Udayar. They loved each other when they were at school. But Michael Amma's family got her engaged to a person of their own community. One day, the Udayar boy followed her to the canal where she had gone to have her bath and confronted her saying, 'After having promised me that we will be husband and wife, are you trying to cheat me by marrying another?' She is said to have asked him, 'Will your people allow me to live if I get married to you?'

He tried to convince her that they could run away from their village and settle down in Devakottai.

'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. Her head rolled to the ground. The boy surrendered to the police with his weapon in hand. He was imprisoned for fourteen years. Now he is a peon in the Kilanchunnai Hospital.

Ever since that murder, there has been no intercaste marriage in that area.

It was probably the after-effect of Michaelamma's murder, but there was a lot of hesitation to marry for love even within one's own caste. Thangarasu and Tamilarasi from the Thovoor cheri old street, studied together at the Salaiyur village school. By the time they finished their school final, they had developed a deep love for each other. No one knew about their love. Thangarasu was fair. So people called him Vellai Thangarasu. The results of the exams were out in the papers. Tamilarasi Akka had passed. Unable to afford an higher education she discontinued her studies. This was a common occurrence in most Dalit families.

The Marandai Konars would call him Doctor Thambi when they saw the nurses, doctors, compounders and attenders greet him in Madurai government hospital, as he walked in wearing his white coat, with a stethoscope around his neck. After they became better they would leave for their homes. When his Machan (bother in law) went with them to see them off at Madurai bus stand, they would say, 'Muniyandi! Shall we then take leave? You get the medicines from the doctor whom you referred us to when you next come to Marandai.' Machan would say, 'Ayya, if you have any other problem come straight to the hospital, I will take care.' They would then leave saying, 'Ok Muniyandi, we will go. Would you like us to take a message for Karupan? See you then Muniyandi....' Those who called him Doctor Thambi in Madurai big hospital, would call him 'Muniyandi' by the time they reach Madurai bus stand. If the same people saw him at the Elayankudi market place they would say, 'What Muniyandi or Ei Muniyandi! When did you come from Madurai? When are you likely to come to Marandai?' At Marandai village the respect would deteriorate further. Thus Machan has often told his the painful truth of how the respect at one receives in the city becomes much diminished in the village. He would jokingly tell him to prescribe the wrong medicines when the upper caste fellows of this village go to him for treatment, thereby complicating their illness. But he used to say, 'The medical profession is a life-saving profession and it insists that we should save even the life of our enemy. Those fellows will change. How long do you think they will be without changing? Otherwise people like us should get educated and

change them.'

He sang plaintively: Kannma, Kannamma, Kannamma, Kannamma..

When he finished rendering this Bharathiyar song, the students clapped enthusiastically till he went back to his place and sat down. Many came to him and said, 'You would win'. he have often thought about that day when people pushed caste aside, and appreciated him for his talent.

When he returned to Sivaganga the next day, the peon brought a message to his class saying that the principal wanted to see him. Meera was there with the principal. Not only did they congratulate him, but they had also nominated him as the cultural secretary of the N.S.S. Unit and the college.

From that day he regularly performed at all the college functions. Since he secured the first mark in the college in Tamil, Meera made him the secretary of the Bhatathi Club the following year. Until this time, no student belonging to the oppressed class had held such posts in the history of the college. Despite knowing that he belonged to the Dalit community, Professor Meera took him to his house and offered him food. Publications like Annam and Agaram, which were spoken of much in Tamil Nadu in those days, were his. Therefore he had the opportunity of getting to know many writers and reviewers in Tamil Nadu. He used to proof-read many books. It was through him that he got to read many Tamil literary texts. It was Poet Meera who introduced him to many writers like late T. Krishna, Congress leader V. Subramanian, Professor Solomon Pappaiah, K.R., Poet Bala, Professor N. Dharmarajan, Poet Abdul Rahman, Thothatri, Tamizh Annal, the assembly speaker, K. Kalimuthu, and others.

CONCLUSION

This paper talks about how Gunasekaran and his family excluded by the society because of Daliths and also this paper makes the feel pain and sufferings of the Dalith society. Gunasekaran's parents were educated but caste and discrimination played major role in their life. Through this autobiography he expressed problems and pains which was undergone in his life. Even though he was well talented in music and he has great caliber to express his talent in his college days but nobody accept or not recognized his talent because of the caste. This paper shows the many incidents like falling in the feet, slapping, negligence, irrespective, discrimination exclusion.

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