

# TRADITION, TRANSLATION, CASTE AND CULTURE IN K.A. GUNASEKARAN'S *THE SCAR*

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## Introduction

Dalit autobiography is a confessional narrative in which it is seen that the author emotions are overflowed as:

“... reactions to the suffered indignities and humiliations” (Singh 18). “His emotional turbulence generates knowledge about his particular context of living and the larger frame of a caste-ridden society” (Singh 19). “Emotional experiences not only process information pertaining to concrete social and cultural settings but also provide coherence to them. It makes visible certain relationships and helps several morally important features of a situation to emerge” (Singh 19).

One such example from Dalit autobiography is *The Scar*, originally *Vadu* in Tamil is written by K.A. Gunasekaran. It is translated from Tamil into English by V. Kadambari. Translation in English from any language helps to reach the global audience and also gives the high recognition to its author and translator. But translation from Indian language to the English language is not in an easy job. “Particularly to find equivalents in an alien language like English needs a lot of knowledge, efficiency and scholarship” (Aital 141). It is complicated. “Unless the translator is able to elicit the implicated meaning between the lines, he/she cannot render it successfully, in the target language” (Aital 141).

In the translator's note of this autobiography, V. Kadambari states that “*Vadu* is written with the vision to change hardened hearts” (xix). To translate this book he searched the whole time - “... quest for understanding human nature and search for methods of societal change, at a time when caste and discrimination seem to be more crude now than ever before” (xix).

K.A. Gunasekaran in *The Scar* narrates many incidents related to the pain of the Parayar caste that faces oppression. During festival times, many nayandi drummers from Gunasekaran's mother birthplace Keeranoor used to visit them without their instruments so that nobody would be able to know that they belong to the Parayar caste. They believe if upper-caste would come to know their caste then they would be treated more horrible than an animal.

It can be seen in the incident when Gunasekaran and his brother go to their periamma's house in Thovoor. Everyone there inquires about their caste before they offer water to them. “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” (20).

In Elayankudi, the clerk of the school asks the Parayars students to stand up and go to the office to take their scholarship forms. It hurts Gunasekaran to stand up in front of other students; it is an embarrassing experience for them. “They would reinforce caste identities by labeling us Pallars, Parayars and Chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was” (5).

Gunasekaran's father also faces the same problem because of caste when he tries to get the signature for the scholarship form for his children. The reason is that of their caste identity, headman would ask them to do the odd jobs for them then only he agrees to sign the form. His father says “It's horrid, the way they display their caste superiority before they sign anything ... ” (9).

During school prayer assembly when Gunasekaran sings in front of Kamaraj, the Congress leader, he gets highly appreciated for it. Gunasekaran also participates in many competitions like fancy-dress, singing oratorical, essay-writing competition, etc. and wins some prizes. He fails in mathematics in the SSLC exam because of his playing an important role as a lead singer in a play. One of a person in his village suggests his father that:

“Sir, Gunasekaran sings very well. Our Elayankudi Government hospital nurse's son, is cinema director Mahendran.

If we approach him, Gunasekaran will become famous in cinema. Shall I do it?” (14).

Therefore, Gunasekaran's father likes the idea but Gunasekaran's cousin Muniyandi rejects it and says that Gunasekaran should first complete his studies. After this incident, Gunasekaran works hard both in his studies and in a shop of some other person.

In the month of Masi, “... the people generally believed that by making their bulls participate in the Muniayya temple contest they would be blessed with good health ... ” (31). So many people participate in this race. The person who controls the agitated bull gets the bounty. Once Muniya's sister gets hurt because a bull suddenly attacked her out of nowhere. Chakiliyar villagers take her to the Madurai hospital from the Elayankudi hospital.

“After four or five days she died. We didn't expect it. I still believe it was because of the indifference of the government doctors that she died: if they had been attentive her stomach could have been stitched up and she could have been saved. If we had had money we would have admitted her in a private hospital” (32).

Gunasekaran, during his stay in Elayankudi's hostel, notices that even education system is corrupted. As the warden never hand out them the daily necessity things given by the government for them. They would also not get the taste of good food there and the food they get would not be in sufficient quantity. One day, Gunasekaran and his colleagues decide to attack the warden out of frustration. But the situation becomes worse because the warden gets heavily injured and few of them get suspended for some time.

Mathivannan's poem "What is Possible", which is translated by Vasantha Suryam, is about the protest by Dalits who face oppression in the hands of upper-caste people:

"Though  
everything is possible  
I'm not going to do  
anything.

Except this:

This mask of disgrace  
That's locked on me  
to show that I am 'low' and you are 'high'-  
this superior face  
that you are wearing-  
these masks  
I'll go on tearing" (Azhagarasan 7).

In Gunasekaran's village, Elayankudi, the caste system is not that rampant as in other villages. Once Gunasekaran opens a shop in Thovoor, a customer runs away after playing the lottery game without paying the money. Gunasekaran chases after him even though he knows that boy is an upper-caste but he doesn't believe in the division of caste system. Thus, he beats up that customer, takes the lottery sheet from him and goes back to cheri.

Later, he faces another problem as the people from that customer's caste come to Gunasekaran's periamma house to beat him up. Gunasekaran hides in a dark area. His periamma and periappa beg forgiveness for him from those people which make Gunasekaran terrified. After a short while, nobody cared about the customer who was beaten. Thus, they become concerned only about a Paraya who entered their street without caring about the caste.

Gunasekaran narrates:

"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 ... They would give you newly cooked rice in the old box. Take it and give them these new mats and boxes .... The mats, winnows and boxes that are made by these people would be used by their masters" (28).

He thinks that it is not only their slavishness but also the exploitation on them by their upper-caste masters.

For the first time, Gunasekaran watches the street plays, the Koravan-Kurathi dances and karagattam in Thovoor temple festivals. Pachri Azhagan and his disciples perform the karagam and Kurathi dances. These performers are from Pudukottai and Thanjavur mainly but they settle in faraway towns.

"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. That is why these artists went away to distant places and practiced their profession with dignity" (35).

He notices in Keeranoor, the caste system is rampant to the point that outside the village, children of all castes can play with each other. But contrarily inside the village lower-caste people are forced to address upper-caste people with respect even if they are younger than them. Dalits are neither allowed to address upper-caste people with name nor touch them. One day when Gunasekaran goes to buy oil from the Keeranoor market. When he returns from the market and walks toward north Keeranoor, a person from the opposite side hits him for not maintaining the distance and shouts "'Look at the cheek of the Paraya boy!' ... " (43).

In Gunasekaran's birthplace, Marandai, he sees a young child chopping the full-grown blossom tree near his house. He asked him, "'Dei! Why are you cutting away the flowers and the tender fruits of our tree?'" (51). When that boy hears this, in a moment he slaps Gunasekaran and runs away. Then that boy comes with his elders to beat Gunasekaran. But Gunasekaran's grandfather comes on time to his rescue and begs with them that Gunasekaran does not understand the caste system of this village. They threaten Gunasekaran:

"Do you know whom you have addressed as 'Dei'? We will cut your tongue. Are you aware of the difference between your caste and ours? You've lost your mind having made friends with the Elayankudi Muslim fellows. Be careful and know your caste before you speak" (51).

After they leave, Gunasekaran's grandfather tells him to always respect the upper-castes even if they are younger than him. In that place, only the higher people are allowed to be called by their refined names.

Muniyandi Machan, Gunasekaran's father nephew, becomes a doctor in Madurai and sometimes come to Marandai to treat his grandfather. "Those who called him Doctor Thambi in Madurai big hospital, would call him 'Muniyandi' by the time they reach Madurai bus stand ... At Marandai village the respect would deteriorate further" (62-3). He receives respect from Marandai upper caste people only in Madurai and those same upper caste people give him no respect in Marandai. Therefore, the caste system is not that serious in cities but very serious in villages.

"The Konars of Marandai were very careful about maintaining caste distinctions" (59). One day, Muniyandi Machan goes to the field and discovers a Konar farmer with an epileptic attack. He helps to gain consciousness by making him touch an iron item. But when that Konar person regains consciousness he hits Muniyandi " ... 'Who asked you touch me? How can you, a Parayan, touch me?'" (60).

There are many incidents like these in the text about caste oppression. Despite facing all these problems, Dalits celebrate their tradition and culture which they believe is better than anyone else. Gunasekaran is influenced by the mixed culture of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

“We understand from this autobiography that at the economically lower rung of society, religions like Islam, Christianity and Hinduism merges, losing their identities in a very natural manner. Especially now, when identities are frozen and differences are brought into sharp focus such efforts to lay open the reality are the need of the hour. Gunasekaran does not do it by displaying his political correctness. But just by laying his life, he has achieved this task” (xiv).

Gunasekaran collects the sugar and dates “... during the celebrations at the Darga and after the faitha is recited. I learnt a lot about Islamic rituals like the faitha and namaz even at a very young age” (4). He thinks of converting to Islam because Hindus oppress Dalits. But “I have been scared of becoming a Muslim after seeing sunnath being performed with a big knife to the accompaniment of recitals from the holy text ...” (4).

Gunasekaran with his Annan’s friends, Maduraiveeran and Balu used to go to announce deaths meaning “... carrying news from the grief stricken households to places which were within eight kilometre distance ...” (29). In return, they get paddy and sell it to small shops to buy eatable items. With the leftover money, they go to watch a film.

Gunasekaran’s says many Dalits converted to Christianity to get an education. “However to benefit from reservation they have registered themselves as Hindu Parayars” (49). On the other hand, “... those people in the cheri who could not or did not want to study, they did not belong to Hinduism or Christianity. They worshipped their own family deities, and followed their traditional rituals” (49).

Only on Deepavali and Christmas, Gunasekaran’s family eats idlis or dosais. Because of poverty, they can’t afford to eat luxurious food when they want to. He repents that his sister Kalavathi, Malathi and Jothi could not have the ear-piercing ceremony because they did not have sufficient money.

“One day my mother took my sister to the Saturday sandai, spent fifty paise to have her earlobes pierced and bought her a stud for one rupee. I feel sad when I think of how my sister did not have a decent function for it like the others” (10).

In *The Scar*, the translator uses some words as it is from the source language to target language like Idli, Appam, Kanji, Sambar, Uppuma, Panniyaram, Poori masal and Sundal. Because if the translator tries to replace these words with equivalent words in target language then the target audience won’t be able to understand the source text’s culture culinary items. “So in the select glossary, these source word meanings are explained which is relevant to source culture.

“Take for instance the translation of certain culture based words from one language into another language which are linguistically and culturally different. And that will show translations as a kind of bridge-building languages. Many Indian food items will defy translation into English. Bertrand Russell example of ‘cheese’ is well-known. Similarly many Oriya food item like ‘Pakhal’ (‘watered rice’) ‘Kanji’ (a kind of ‘Dal’ prepared from watered rice), ‘Sukua’ (dry-fish), etc. cannot be intelligible to a non-native speaker or an Englishman” (Das 70).

In the text, *The Scar*, words like Ammayi, Annan, Athai, Ayya, Chithappa, Mama, Periamma, etc. means maternal grandmother, an elder brother, father’s sister, sir, father’s younger brother, mother’s brother, mother’s elder sister respectively. The source language words are used by the translator in target text without rendering it into the target language.

“Certain ... words of common use in everyday conversation based on culture cannot be translated accurately into a foreign tongue” (Das 44).

Gunasekaran learns music from his cousin Muniyandi Machan who tells him to sing with his mouth, not nose while they walk to Marandai through the fields. “It is this practice that Machan gave me at home and on the fields and grounds that has made me known to the people as a singer” (63). He also learns music from Muniyandi Machan’s colleague T.R. Mahalingam who is an actor-singer.

In his college times, Gunasekaran gets an opportunity to sing a folk song which gets broadcasted in the Trichy All India Radio show. Many villagers “... after working in the fields the whole day, would listen to it on the Panchayat radio” (52). They would also announce his name Elayankudi K.A. Gunasekaran before and after the song. One day, a Marandai fellow asks him that why Gunasekaran doesn’t identify himself as Marandai. He replies it is because in Marandai place caste issue is more prevalent than Elayankudi. Gunasekaran says:

“The Elauankudi 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).

Gunasekaran also sings in a college competition where the other caste people creates problems for him and makes loud sounds. But the judges tell Gunasekaran to continue and after some time all people in the audience listens to him. After he finishes the song many people praise him. He even gets a letter from a caste-conscious person who was making noise in the audience and asks his forgiveness for being narrow-minded.

He even wins first prize for singing in a district level music competition in Ramanathapuram. He gets appointed as the cultural secretary of the N.S.S. Unit and the college as well as the secretary of the Bharati Club.

“Until this time, no student belonging to the oppressed class had held such posts in the history of the college. Despite knowing that I belonged to the Dalit community, Professor Meera took me to his house and offered me food” (69).

Through Professor Meera, he gets the opportunity to meet many writers and reviewers and proof-read many Tamil books. He gets a seat in M.A. Tamil but he dislikes the subject Saiva Siddhanta in that college. Professor Meera encourages him to try this subject before he makes any judgment about it. During his first year, he goes to Delhi with his professor Om Periyaswami to take

part in the Republic celebration in 1981. He meets Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who advises Gunasekaran to do research in folk arts. His photograph with Indira Gandhi also gets published in a local newspaper.

During college holidays, he goes to his village Elayankudi. He becomes anxious because “At home I cannot expect three meals a day. We had to study with an empty stomach” (74). Although he doesn’t get enough food there at home, the warmth he gets from his family members is enough to change his mind.

“For all my troubles, poverty had been the fundamental reason. I had to struggle against poverty to get educated. Even today many young men who come from Dalit families are like me, struggling to escape the clutches of poverty” (77).

Gunasekaran’s mother always tells him “If you study you can live in a dignified manner. So study hard ... ” (81). At a young age, Gunasekaran becomes close to a boy named Farook who takes him to watch movies with him secretly. Later, when Gunasekaran witnesses Farook stealing the money, he tells his mother who scolds him for being influenced by a bad company and for neglecting his studies. “After a while I came to know that Farook was indeed sent to jail” (82). Gunasekaran feels indebted to his mother who scolded him for his own good.

His father influence can be seen on him “Because he brought us up by paying attention to arts, literature, politics and education, we too developed an interest in all these things” (83). His father used to write petitions for people who come to him from neighborhood areas or prepare notes for his classes without caring about anything else. His father doesn’t believe in one particular god or religion and teaches his children also to become progressive thinker like him. Thus, in this autobiography Gunasekaran not only write about his experiences but about his whole community.

### Conclusion

In India, every region uses different languages so it becomes difficult for readers of other regions or other language readers to read it. So, translation plays an important part as it brings two different cultures to come closer and understand each other. It also gives global recognition to both the translator and the author.

K.A. Gunasekaran’s autobiography *The Scar* gives the wonderful societal description of Dalits who live in the mixed culture of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Gunasekaran not only writes about his life struggles due to poverty but also about the love and support he gets from his family members.

He achieves education and develops an interest in arts, literature and politics because of his father’s influence. He wins prizes “... in all kinds of competitions like poetry, reading, singing, acting, public speech and sports activities” (83). He becomes a folk artist who is not restrained by conventions. He crosses the obstacles imposed by caste system with the aid of his artistic achievements.

He feels proud to assert the truth that his community of people is kind to even those inhuman people who practice untouchability and maintain their own cultural roots in the midst of evil caste-system. Therefore, this book is written with a vision to change cynical hearts of people who practice caste discrimination.

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