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# **Marginal Experience and the Aesthetics of Autobiography: An Analysis of K A Gunasekaran's *The Scar and Touch***

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## **Abstract**

*Autobiography is one of the prominent literary forms used by Dalit writers to express their resistance and document a history that does not surface in the dominant discourses. The emergence, development and diverse application of this genre are deeply intertwined with two fundamental dimensions of Dalit studies: politics and aesthetics. Raj Gowthaman in his text *poi +Abhatham = Unmai* has said that Dalit literature is a movement away from realist writing and towards post-modern writing. It is in this post-modern sense that the literariness of the form of autobiography and the autobiographical nature of any literary production beg to be studied. This paper investigates the extent to which life narratives that have historical significance do have a role in contributing to the aesthetics of Dalit literature. Using SharankumarLimbale's "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature", this study investigates how one incident from K.A Gunasekaran's autobiography *The Scar*, is transformed into the play *Touch* thereby bridging the gap between historical representation and aestheticization. Being a folk artist, Gunasekaran has used his art as a form of resistance attempting to have a dialogue with the mainstream. Additionally, it also addresses the question of how autobiography as a mode of writing can be understood and analysed in other literary forms like drama.*

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Autobiography, Form, Mode, Aesthetics, The Scar.

## **Introduction**

The rise of Dalit literature has posed severe challenges to the existing forms of literary expressions across India. Its emergence in Tamil Nadu has enriched Tamil literature in many ways "demanding that the literary canon shift while redefining the field of aesthetics" (Muthukaruppan 64). Of the various literary forms, life narratives have their role in shaping the Dalit discourse. Centered around shedding light on one's lived experiences, life narratives become significant for the truth value that is often associated with it. It can even be said "Life narratives are not merely part of Dalit literature,

but in many ways, these narratives determine and constitute Dalit literature" (Muthukaruppan 64). These autobiographies serve as a vehicle "to elicit effectively the traumatized experiences of the Dalits and the cultural contestations they confront in a society which is regarded as the monopoly of the upper castes" (Sreelekshmi 16).

The attachment of the category called 'Dalit' has been severely problematic. While some writers have accepted it, there are others who claim that their work demands to be looked at for its aesthetic accomplishments. The set of writers who find the attachment of the category 'Dalit' necessary have argued for "Dalit literature on the basis of identity and foregrounded politics rather than aesthetics" (Muthukaruppan, 66). This brings the argument to two words, 'politics' and 'aesthetics.' This paper examines Gunasekaran's *The Scar* and *Touch* for its historical significance and the employment of formal aesthetics. It explores the juncture at which these two meet.

### Deviations from Standard Autobiographical Features

One of the significant features of a life narrative is that it requires a reality that stands outside of the text. This has been one of the defining features since the theorisation of the genre of autobiography in the 20th century. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* does represent the referential reality but not in the linear chronological progression. It does not chronologically trace the growth and development of the 'subject.' The narrative time keeps shifting back and forth and each chapter is an episode from Gunasekaran's life.

The second feature of autobiographies is the inseparability of the author and the narrator. Both the narrator and the author are the same and the entire book is a recollection and making sense of one's past. As Philippe Lejuene famously said, autobiography is "a retrospective narrative in prose." But Dalit autobiographies or marginal autobiographies in general, would have a collectivity in their representation. The author/narrator speaks as a representation of the entire community. The hardships endured by the author/narrator are reflective of the broader struggles faced by the community. The traditional Western enlightenment Individualism cannot be the parameter with which a Dalit autobiography can be judged. It is in this sense that K.A Gunasekaran's *The Scar* is also understood. The form of this autobiography does not exhibit the characteristics of a usual autobiography.

The experiences that are shared in each of these episodes are relatable to anybody who has lived a similar life to Gunasekaran. In addition to this the experiences that are shared are not solely about Gunasekaran and his life. He has recorded the experiences of other people as well: Muniyandi machan, his own father, the couple who were not let into the streets, and the woman who was beheaded and so on. In all these, the common thread that connects each of their experiences is caste and how it has impacted them in different ways. Regardless of an individual's education and professional accomplishments, the level of respect accorded to them is ultimately determined by their caste affiliation. Therefore, the subject of this kind of autobiography is not just the author, though it is through the exposition of the author's life that he talks about other people's experiences.

### Dalit writing in relation to literary Realism and Postmodernism

Dalit writings are often considered to belong to the tradition of literary realism. However, Raj Gowthaman argues that this cannot be the case, as the tradition of literary realism is predominantly shaped by the bourgeoisie. In addition to it, he says, realism is the recording of things in the way that society is used to seeing things. Hence, the representation of Dalits in these realist literatures aligns with the prevailing societal and collective attitudes towards them. It is not a representation of a Dalit's reality or at least it can be argued that Dalit literature which cries for liberation through rebellion cannot be part of the realist tradition (Gowthaman 55-56). This realism can and will never

question the condition of Dalits in a Caste Hindu Society. Dalit literature in its essence attempts to break dominant discourses by going beyond the established boundary for what literature should mean. Both in its mode of expression and thematic concerns, Dalit literature has crossed the boundaries of modernism and is in a movement towards postmodernism (Gowthaman 57).

The uniqueness of Dalit literature is in the inclusion of the ‘folk’ traditions into it (Gowthaman 56). The autobiography *The Scar* extensively features folk songs as part of its narrative structure. It can be argued that the text exhibits a musical quality as each folk song mentioned contributes to establishing the mood of a particular scene. This characteristic is also evident in his play *Touch*, which opens with a mournful song. Azhagarasan and Ravikumar claim that “Dalit theatre emerged... incorporating the unrecognized folk performance traditions and fused them with the aspects of the ‘invisible theatre,’ ‘theatre of violence, ‘native theatre’ and ‘feminist and black theatre’” (161). Dalit literature can be interpreted as a modern adaptation of the folk traditions (Gowthaman 56).

In the post-modern context the emergence of the writings from the margins can be seen as a challenge to the conventional forms of autobiography. The subject of an autobiography does not need to be a widely recognized or historically significant figure to attract readership; it can center on the life of an ordinary Individual.

The definition of the genre ‘autobiography’ has been intricate and often regarded as irrelevant. However, in spite of the complexities “the autobiographical genre has not only survived the test of time but it is in fact booming in the contemporary literary post-modern landscape all over the world” (Singh, 81). Various literary forms such as poetry and drama tend to be ‘autobiographical’ in that this adjectival usage symbolizes the movement from understanding autobiography as a genre to a mode of expression. Generic terms are denoted by the use of nouns while “modal terms tend to be adjectival” (Fowler, 106).

This kind of understanding opens a broader space to interpret other forms like that of a play or a poem to have been written in the autobiographical mode. K.A. Gunasekaran’s autobiography and the play *Touch* contribute to the study in this regard. The autobiography has an episode where the narrator Gunasekaran talks about the experience his machan Muniyandi had when he touched an upper caste person. He has used this episode from real life to write a play called ‘Thodu’ which is translated in English as *Touch*. The aim of this paper is to study how a certain event is narrated when the medium of narration is a genre called ‘autobiography’ and how it gets narrated in the medium of narration called a ‘drama.’ The various elements that the author has included and excluded become subjects for consideration and help to understand two different aspects – the formal aesthetics and the historicity of the narrated event.

### **Limbale’s Dalit Aesthetics and its relation to the text**

Sharankumar Limbale says that the equation of aesthetics to pleasure is not suitable for a Dalit writing. “Pain or suffering” he says, “is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (Limbale 114-115). It cannot be understood with the parameters of traditional aesthetics. “The purpose of traditional literature”, Gupta says “is to provide aesthetic pleasure based on satya (truth), shivam (goodness) and sundaram (beauty). Dalit writers violate these fundamental principles of aesthetics, laid down in the beautiful trinities of satya (truth), shivam (goodness) and sundaram (beauty) as well as ‘Liberty, Fraternity and Equality’” (2). As Kumari and Kapoor claim, Dalit aestheticism emphasizes “art for life’s sake” while the “non-dalit writing revolves around rasa and the motive is art for art’s sake” (2). In the introduction to *The Scar* Ravikumar claims that a Dalit autobiography “should be so light as air and simple enough for children to understand. Yet it should fall on the souls of the readers like smouldering coal”

The intended effect of Dalit writing is not aesthetics of pleasure. It is not to arouse “joy and sympathy in people.” Rather, the revolutionary literature “awakens consciousness of self-respect” (Limbale 119). Raj Gowthaman also shares this view when he says that the aesthetics of a Dalit writing lies in the rebellious nature of the text (poi, 54). The activism-aesthetic intersection is unique to Dalit writings.

Limbale says that a “Dalit literature cannot be fully appraised without knowledge of the Dalit writers’ experience, their anger, rejection and rebellion vis-à-vis traditional values as well as the social context” (118). To appreciate this, the reader must have his or her prior reading. In this respect the autobiography *The Scar* sets the social context where the incident happens. It becomes the capital with which the reader is now able to understand the theatics of the play *Touch* and the need for certain effects.

### **Analysis: Referential narration in *The Scar* and Aesthetic Reimagination in *Touch***

Caste has been the gripping reality of Gunasekaran’s life. He mentions at various places in the text that he felt embarrassed because he was asked to pronounce out loud the name of his caste. He says “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” (Gunasekaran ch.1). He was even told by his mother to say that he was a Christian if anyone asked his caste, because that identity felt more dignified. Though this experience is a reality, casteism seems to have seeped into other religions as well. *Karukku* is appreciated for bringing out to the world how caste practices are still very evident in the Christian denominations. In the same vein, Gunasekaran brings out how casteism is still functional among Muslims. In his place, Dalits and Muslims share a very amicable relationship. But when he goes to Thivoor, even muslims ask for the caste. He brings to light this dual reality. When as a young boy he asked why the muslims in this place ask for the caste, his brother Karunanithi said that Muslims must have learnt it from other castes like Saanar and Konar. He records this in his autobiography saying “Even if we asked Muslim household for water, they too would ask us, ‘Who are you?’ before they offered us water” (Gunasekaran, ch.2). He establishes this rigid casteist reality in which he spent his childhood.

It is in the fifth chapter that he talks about a certain incident that later gets its dramatic form. When Muniyandi machan who is a doctor was walking by the fields he saw a man having an epileptic attack and the man fell on the ground and frothed from his mouth. He rushed to the spot and made him hold the plough made of iron. Though the seizures subsided he did not regain consciousness. So, he took water from Konar’s porridge pot and splashed it on his face. After having regained consciousness, the man belonging to the Konar caste was very angry that he was touched by a man belonging to the ‘Parayar’ caste. That evening the panchayat was formed and muniyandi machan was made to fall prostrate and apologise. Most people in the Panchayat were of the opinion that it was sheer arrogance of Muniyandi Machan that made him touch the porridge vessel. This is the scene that is described in Autobiography.

This undergoes few changes when it is made in the form of a play. The porridge pot is transformed into a mud pot which becomes the center of the stage. Everything that happens on the stage is centered around that pot. There are no named characters as in the case of the autobiography. There are just four actors who play the characters of the oxen, the old man, the man from the lower caste and the chorus. There is also a woman who sits by the side of the pot with her hair on it before the beginning of the play and also at the end of the play. A mournful music sets the scene for Dalit aesthetics. The woman can be interpreted to represent mother earth who expresses her vexation about the sufferings that these people undergo. From the beginning of the play, the audience is

directed to anticipate an impending moment of unease or distress. This theatrical improvisation uses the narrative space to create a mood.

There is a scene in the play where one of the actors asks the other three if they have the guts to touch the pot. They claim with arrogance that they can but the moment the flute music comes the actors exhibit body language that signs a mental distress and they slowly collapse on stage. The pot here can be interpreted as a representative of the sanctified nature of the system of caste. It is so powerful and has attained such a status that if anyone touches it there would be severe consequences. Having established the status of the pot, the actual scene begins when a farmer (one of the four actors) is seen having seizures and the passerby (another actor) sees this and calls for help. Since no one comes for help, he takes it upon himself to rescue him and gives him the iron plough to hold so the seizures may subside. He then helps the man sit, gives water from the pot and brings him back to consciousness. The important difference between the narration in the autobiography and in the play is that Muniyandi machan does not show any hesitancy when he wants to help the old man. But the passerby character in the play has a certain hesitation before touching both the pot and the old man's body. He was aware that he was overstepping a social boundary, but decided to do so because there was no alternative assistance. He prays to God and uses mud as sacred ash before touching his body and helping him.

This moment of improvisation serves as a form of communication with the audience. Drama, as a performative medium, unfolds in the presence of an audience, establishing a more immediate and direct connection to the readers(audience) compared to the written autobiographical form. The immediate presence of the audience heightens the dramatist's awareness, leading to the creation of characters who are themselves conscious and consequently, hesitant. This deliberate characterization allows the audience to reflect on the underlying caste dynamics while simultaneously building anticipation for an act that is socially prohibited.

As soon as the farmer wakes up he reacts just like the old man in the autobiography reacted. He hurled curses and asked if he touched him. He was more bothered about his saviour being a parayar than the fact that he could have been dead if that parayar was not there. The play adds a little humour in this place. When the old man realizes he has been touched by a lower he quickly feels uncomfortable within his own body as he considers himself to be polluted. He wanted to touch the pot which again he considers polluted. He wanted to touch the plough but even that was polluted. Somehow managing to get up, he throws a fist full of mud as a curse and hugs the bullocks calling them with endearing names. The bullocks bellow and all of them bellow together which creates a humorous chorus.

This part is the liberty that Gunasekaran the dramatist has taken. The debate of how true a work of art is relevant here. The fact that the old man hugs the bullocks is fictionalization. But that fictional element has a truth to it. The autobiography does not have that. Realising that someone is a farmer comes with the implication that they are accustomed to handling animals, particularly bullocks. What the dramatist Gunasekaran has done, is that he has resumed the play at certain moments for the sake of complete conveyance of the emotion. And he does something that is the mark of a creative intervention. Two emotions - humour and serious social satire - happen one after the other. The usual expectation is that the man from the lower caste who is subject to the discrimination must feel broken and is about to expect ostracization as a severe punishment or a public apology. But pausing the scene there, and magnifying the foolishness thereby garnering a laughter which is then followed by a serious social commentary is much impactful. It can ease the audience and almost bring them to a shared moral consensus about the event, allowing satire to create a space where they can critically reassess their perspectives on caste. It is the foolishness that receives emphasis, rather than the social repercussions that Muniyandi had to endure in reality. This is in accordance

with one of the three essential aspects that constitute dalit aesthetics according to Limbale which is “the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity” (120).

## Conclusion

The difference in narration is a result of the two distinct literary forms the author chose to narrate the event. Each form of literary expression follows certain conventions, but that does not imply genre rigidity. This study looks at both the literariness of autobiography and the autobiographical nature of drama, and in doing so, the need for a different interpretative standard within the framework of Dalit writing becomes evident.

Analysing the prose, one can see that its episodic nature challenges the linearity often expected in life narratives. The narration moves back and forth, presenting individual events rather than following a strict chronological sequence. The narrator often addresses the reader directly, as seen in the statement: “If I told you that ridiculous incident that Machan told me, you would certainly agree with what I say”. Here, ‘you’ refers to the reader. Unlike a novel, where the fourth wall largely remains intact- though postmodern experiments have sought to break it – autobiography does not necessarily require an immersive reading experience. While this breaking of the fourth wall could be seen as a postmodern influence, it also points to the need for a new reading and interpretive strategy specific to autobiography. It raises questions about the kind of readers/audience that the author expects

For a play written in the autobiographical mode, the autobiographical element becomes integral to the artist’s process of world-building. Autobiography is most compelling when viewed not as a rigidly defined genre but as a fluid mode of expression, allowing for experimentation and reinterpretation. The whole incident is not an experience that Gunasekaran experienced. It is the experience of Muniyandi Machan to which he was a witness. An incident to which the author was a witness could be reimagined in the dramatic medium where the focus is on making the readers (audience) question their moral conscience.

Eliot famously said that all art is impersonal, with the author serving merely as a catalyst. In *Touch*, this impersonal quality is evident in the absence of explicit references to Gunasekaran himself or to the specific individuals who experienced humiliation in real life. Yet it remains deeply personal in that its content has direct references to real experiences. In this context, understanding the term autobiographical as a mode of expression reveals just one layer of meaning within the complex narratives the texts present.

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