

Breaking Tenets: A Study of Stigmatized Lives in *oru Keri* and *The Scar*

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'I am born as a Hindu,
Yet I will not die as the same.'

(Translation Mine) (*Ambedkari Movement versus Dalit Movement*: 162)

Dalit writers have been expressing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings about their lives in the casteist social system of India through their writings. Initially, they resorted to the genre of poetry and later moved to other genres of literature. Autobiography is a very influential genre through which Dalit writers have portrayed a realistic picture of the Dalit world. The Dalit autobiographies were first written in the 1930s. In the Introduction of **The Scar** (2009) Ravikumar, a well-known Tamil Dalit scholar, remarks regarding the origin of the genre of the Dalit autobiography. "At the national level, Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasan are the precursors of the Dalit autobiographical form as per research indicators at present (X). But, at the same time, Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane, Marathi dalit writer, says that, "Only Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the first Dalit autobiographer." (Translation Mine) Prabodhan: Jan-Feb, 2009: 11)

Later on, in the 1970s other Marathi Dalit writers began to write their autobiographies. Since then, Dalit autobiographies are being written by the Dalits throughout the country. K. A. Gunasekaran from Tamil Nadu and Siddalingaiah from Karnataka are two famous Dalit autobiographers whose autobiographies mainly deal with the stigmatized life of the Dalits. The present research paper focuses on the space created by the educated Dalits, especially Siddaligaiah and Gunasekaran.

If the Dalits are not educated, they will be exploited and harassed in many ways. In Shankarrao Kharat's Marathi autobiography, **Taral-Antaral**, he narrates that when his father, Rama's, sister died and a

letter of that sad news came to him, there was no one in his family or community who could read the letter to Rama. Since there existed illiteracy among the Dalits, a non-Dalit teacher made Rama to cut woods for his consumption of four days only for reading the letter to him. For the teacher the news of the death of Rama's sister was not important at all. But, on the other hand, he got an opportunity to get his woods cut by Rama. Only after Rama cut the woods, the teacher read the letter. When Rama and his son, the author of **Taral-Antaral**, Shankarrao Kharat came to know about the shrewdness, cunningness and inhumanity of the teacher, they could do nothing because there was no solution before them. "The teacher read the letter loudly and threw it on my father. Father fell silent. With great tyranny he looked down and got up on the step of the teacher's house. He left the house looking down. He wiped his eyes when he set out." (Translation Mine) (**The Autobiographies of Dalits: Concept and Nature:** 131). On the one hand, we see this pathetic condition of the Dalits due to illiteracy. On the other hand, in **Ooru Keri**, (2003) a Dalit educated boy read and explained the letters to the uneducated people. But he did not demand anything from them in return, yet he was offered some money and food. In this case Siddalingaiah remembers: "People felt very happy because I not only read the letters but explained their meanings also. Some would make me write letters to their relatives. I would then get, besides a generous amount of eats, some money as well. For the handful who got love letters, I was equal to god." (**Ooru Keri:** 33, 34). The above quoted lines indicate that the education is the basis of human life. Education is as important and indispensable as food and water for the Dalits. It is necessary for the Dalit parents to get their children educated; otherwise there will not be any full stop to their miserable life.

Poverty is a paralyzing factor for all living beings. But for the Dalits it is a curse. It makes them steal food, and edible items like fruits. The other thing it does is that the hatred and disharmony among family members. The picture of the poverty in certain families is portrayed in **Ooru Keri**. Siddalingaiah expresses his agony: "Some women would shout loudly to their husbands, "Why did you get married when you can't bring home enough to feed us?" Silence was the men's answer. Some little children beat up their parents when they felt hungry. A boy called Ramu hadn't the least respect for his father.-. When people asked him

(Ramu) about his father's health, he would say indifferently, "He isn't dead yet." (37).

In India for the first time the practice of untouchability was outlawed by the constitution of India. Yet, even after more than sixty years of the Indian independence, there is no sign of the complete removal of it. It is prevalent more in villages than in cities. **Ooru Keri** points out the existence of untouchability in villages as well as in cities like Bangalore. "They made us sit outside and gave us coffee. As soon as they went in, Gangadharaiah (Siddalingaiah`a friend who is also a Dalit) poured the coffee out on to ground. I had already drunk half of the cup, but watching him, I poured out what was left." (100).The above quotation is the portrayal of the untouchability in village. The following one is at Government Arts College in Bangalore where a non-Dalit lecturer mistook Siddalingaiah, a Dalit student, for a Lingayat and asked him to fetch water for him. As soon as the teacher came to know that Siddalingaiah was a Dalit, he stopped asking him to do so. "Why he still chose me to fetch water became a subject of discussion in class. He had mistaken me for a Lingayat. I was liberated from the task of fetching water after he came to know my caste." (76). In addition to this, there are fierce clashes between the Dalits and the non-Dalits in the writer's college for whenever there were any functions, especially radical ones. Such clashes depict a realistic picture of the conservative citizens of Bangalore who always objected to the changes for the betterment of the stagnant society.

What is more striking and unique about the Dalits is that they are artists and actors, but they are not in the public sphere only due to consciousness of the caste system and weird mentality of the non-Dalits. Though Dalit and poor, Siddalingaiah turned out to be an intellectual and a scholar when he was still a college student. As he was a progressive thinker, it was inevitable for him to deal with phenomena like debates and arguments. By virtue of his intellect, he managed to get selected for a debate competition at an inter-collegiate level. Later on, he won many prizes for debates. Secondly, he emerged as a very good poet and became a professional poet. At the same time, he became a very good orator and shone as a popular speaker for those who wanted to bring about a change for better in the then society. It can be said that the traditional people are more and more fanatics, yet there is always some

hope of change because people like Siddalingaiah are taking pains for bringing about a transformation in the society. In his autobiography he points out that he had to face many dangerous man-made calamities like when he put out the lamp in a debate competition, some boys forced him to light it again. But he refused to do so, when he spoke about the destruction of the caste system, the caste conscious people tried their best to murder him, etc. he points out through his deeds that it is indispensable for the Dalits to be awake and watchful and fight for the equality of humanity. In a sense, they have to make progress in almost all fields to have a human life. It is quite impossible to do it without facing such man-made calamities.

In the case of Gunasekaran also, he was a good singer. He participated in a few music competitions too. But Dalits like him are deprived of opportunities. In no way they and the non-Dalits can be compared because the platforms from where they both struggle are completely different.

Ooru Keri shows that the Dalits have not escaped from the clutches of the blind faith. They are god-fearing people. Some of them are possessed by gods and goddesses, but there is no mention of the gods and goddesses possessing any non-Dalits. The Dalits are possessed by the specific gods and goddesses. They have to get rid of such phenomena because these are some of the reasons for their poverty and miserable life. Siddalingaiah tells us about many ghost episodes, but he says that he is an atheist now. He remembers: "By that time I had already lost faith in god." (72). This is not the case only with him to be a theist in his childhood and an atheist in his later life, but it is with many educated Dalits. Another Dalit autobiography, **Government Brahmana**, shows that its writer, Arvind Malagatti, was also a strong believer in the existence of gods and goddesses. But, later on, he became a staunch atheist. Siddalingaiah's autobiography indicates that he is a progressive thinker. His thoughts are revolutionary.

Whereas Gunasekarans's father himself was a teacher. He was an atheist. Gunasekaran reminisces: "Our parents never showed any special interest in God, temples and rituals. We too never came under the influence of faith because of them. (83). If a Dalit family has a highly educated person, he or she may make aware his family members of the

reality of the world. That is what has happened with Gunasekaran's family.

But what is most important is that Siddalingaiah not only happened to know the noble thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar, the Messiah and saviour of the Dalits, but did labour work to buy his books. **Ooru Keri** points out that he is greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's mission because he was invited many times by various schools' students to deliver speeches on his thoughts. At the same time, there was not even a single mention of Dr. Ambedkar in Gunasekaran's autobiography. That is, he still does not know his great thoughts and movement for the upliftment of the downtrodden in India. It shows that Gunasekaran is completely ignorant of the revolutionary Dalit world, though he faced many more hardships and suffered at the hands of the non-Dalits.

The Dalits have been converting to other religions. The main reason behind their conversion is the tyranny, harassment, discrimination, humiliation and compulsion which they have been experiencing at the hands of the caste Hindus. It is inevitable for the Dalits to convert themselves to the religion which at least favours human and moral values. Gunasekaran narrates his experience of caste harassment and his idea to convert to Islam: "I have experienced harassment in the name of caste and have often thought about converting to Islam." (4). But to his misfortune, if he converted to Islam, he would not be accepted as a Muslim because the Muslims in India are infected by the caste disease like the caste Hindus too. **The Scar** shows that the Islam is polluted by the casteism in Hinduism and so the Muslims in India follow not only Islam but the Hinduism also. Gunasekaran recounts: "There were fifty Muslim families and a mosque in Karunchutti. Even if we asked a Muslim household for water, they too would ask us, 'Who are you?' before they offered us water." (20). The same story is reiterated by one of the most famous Marathi Dalit writers, Daya Pawar, in his autobiography **Balutan**. "The Muslims practice untouchability with the Mahars, no one eats and drinks from the Mahar family, when I learnt it, I was just shocked." (Translation Mine) (171).

Gunasekaran shows that caste discrimination is a severe punishment for nothing for those who are born in Dalit families. Their only crime is they are born in that particular society. Among the

downtrodden the most downtrodden is the Dalit woman because she is the worst sufferer on the basis of caste as well as gender. There have been very strict conditions to be observed by the Dalits. If they do not observe them, they will be punished in a very cruel way. For Dalit women there have been more strict conditions. They have to follow them without fail. **The Scar** portrayed it: “The cheri women were not allowed to wear blouses as per the caste regulations of the village. Girls my age who came to this village after their marriage too have been subjected to this.”(27). One can state that there may be certain boundary to the exploitation of slaves, but in the case of the Dalits they are exploited beyond the level of exploitation. The social system in Hinduism has destroyed the humanity of the Dalits and snatched every kind of right of them. According to it, they are inborn servants of the non-Dalits with whom they cannot afford to be equal because it is against their religion. Therefore, to be born in the Dalit family is to be cursed forever. A non-Dalit small child can bluntly address any elderly Dalit person in singular. But no elder Dalit person can address such non-Dalit children in singular. “Inside the village we had to address the upper caste person as, ‘Ayya’ and ‘Sami’. The women were referred to as ‘Nachiyar’ or ‘Aachi’. One had to call even those who were younger in age only thus. No one can call the upper caste boys or girls by their names.” (**The Scar**: 42). It shows that Hinduism is basically a discriminatory religion. In the same way, the non-Dalits go to the extent to twist the names of the Dalits and address them in disrespectful terms.

Both Siddalingaiah and Gunasekaran have portrayed the real picture of their lives in their autobiographies. Their world begins from nothing and ends after becoming something. During this nothing and something their struggle for existence, identity, progress, humanity, equality, liberty, fraternity, justice, etc. goes on. Not only are they inborn victims of the establishment but inborn fighters of it which is basically crooked also. They are struggling personalities to come up in the life. They are good examples of progress for the other stigmatized personalities in the Dalit society who have to face the worst difficulties for creating their own world.

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