



# Memory as Text: Subalternity and Dalit Identity in the novel *Untouchable Spring*

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## ABSTRACT

Interminable history of exclusion and marginalization characterize most of the Dalit communities in India and the predicament of their lives remains the same till now. Amid the developments, technological advancements and the growth of economy, the ethnic/ minorities in India have not regenerated from the rubric of hierarchical practices and caste prejudices. The perils of being a Dalit in the socio-political-economic condition of India remain a great risk and challenge even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Various Dalit leaders, activists, thinkers and philosophers through their persuasive movements and protests in the history of India have championed the course of Dalit issues by creating a valuable presence and recognition for Dalits. The opening juncture of Dalit literature can be traced back to Marathi language and its repercussions perceptible in other literatures in the subsequent years. By placing it outside the mainstream literary canon, Dalit literature emerged as a source of authentic and reliable experiences. Dalit writers commenced to voice their own experiences and the struggles meted out in their lifetime in their works. A contemporary presence, G. Kalyana Rao is the most acclaimed Telegu novelist, short story writer, playwright and human rights activist known famously for his work *Untouchable Spring*. Vibrant member of the group 'Virasam', Viplava Rachayitala Sangham, his writings are intricately woven in the historiography of a place with its culture, arts and traditions co-mingled with one another. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* unravels the struggles and agonies of the Dalit communities and Rao has effectively articulated his concerns surrounding caste consciousness and gender vantage points in the novel. This paper intends to examine how caste identity renderings and the subaltern narratives vocalize in this novel by approaching the text as a memory narrative.

**Keywords:** Caste, Culture, Identity, Dalit, Oppression, Memory, Subaltern.

## Introduction

Indian society with its rigid form of social stratification on the basis of caste has consigned majority of Dalit communities to the margins and relegated from the mainstream spheres since time immemorial. A difficult task to trace the origin of caste system, different factors contributed to the emergence of this categorization in

the pre-historic era. Based on occupation, the four-fold varna system grouped the people into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vyshas, Sudras and an exempted category called Untouchables fall outside this structure. Survived through the colonial period, the caste system in post-independence India has gripped its vile clutches by making it a basic characteristic in the political scenario of our country. Tracing the opening moment of Dalit discourse in Ambedkar, he points out caste system is not merely a division of labourers-which is quite different from division of labour- it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other (Ambedkar 234).

The term 'subaltern' was first coined by Antonio Gramsci in *Notes on Italian History* which later appeared in his magnum opus *Prison Notebooks*(1929-1935). In a nutshell, he refers to the subaltern as people with "low rank", but now it covers the broad spectrum of marginalized people dominated by hegemonic powers: "The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are to become a "State": their history therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (Gramsci 52). Spivak's ground breaking article "*Can the Subaltern speak ?*" set the ground for the emerging subaltern studies. View of subaltern in the historiography of India can be traced to the efforts of Subaltern Studies Group propounded by Ranajit Guha, which includes Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Touraj Atabaki, David Hardiman and so on. Guha asserts that in the Indian context, subordination can be expressed in terms of caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. Broadly speaking, the subaltern encompasses all the exploited and depressed ethnic/minority communities by the authoritarian hegemonic powers across the nations.

### *Untouchable Spring: Memory Text, Subalternity and Dalit Identity*

*Untouchable Spring* originally written in Telegu as *Antarani Vasantam*(2000) and translated into English, is an excavation into the roots of heritage and traditional culture of the foregone ages of Dalit communities spanning through several generations of a Dalit family in the colonial and post-colonial period. Ruth, the narrator of the novel employs the device of memory to recount the rich legacy of their ancestors as their lives interlace with the art, culture, folklores and oral history. An unconventional narrative structure, the novel moves back and forth of past and present generations to unfold the tale of Yennela Dinni as: "to think to Yennela Dinni was to remember the flute songs that are born between the lips of the untouchable... Sang songs. Danced" (Rao 5). Enriching from oral tradition, Ruth's narrative encircles innumerable narratives to delineate the ages of exploitation and the survival of the Mala and Madigas communities of Yennela Dinni. The present slide away in a moment, the past appears but the memories she carries of her husband Reuben are solely her present. The whole narrative augments on the memory of Ruth to transpire the chronicles of the untouchables, the Malas and Madiagas communities of the Yennela Dinni in the state of Andhra Pradesh. As a memory text and an autobiographical content, the novel highlights the hegemony of the upper-caste Hindus such as Karanams, Brahmins, Reddys and the repression of Dalit communities by degrading them to occupy inhumane conditions. Moreover, their performative art forms and culture which bear the mark of their identity has been erased from the established notions of literary canon as history made a neglect of them. "Many artists were buried in the depths of the past. There are no records that history has made a note of them in the pages. In this

country caste is more important than art. In this country caste is more important than art. Art is also weighed in the scale of art. As for certain cases, not just being not weighed, they have not been allowed near the scale” (Rao 41).

Unraveling the caste bigotry through several generations of individuals belonging to untouchable community - Yellanna and Subhadra, Sivaiah and Sasirekha, Ruth and Reuben, Immanuel and Mary Suvarta, Jessie and Ruby, the novel explores a sordid tale of exploitation from the hands of upper caste hegemony who perceives them as ‘other’. As story unfolds, Ruth narrates Reuben’s memories of his ancestors notably his grandfather Yellanna by unfurling their stories. These stories exemplify how intense was the practice of untouchability in the pre-colonial era and the sufferings lived through by the Dalit communities. One instance was that at young age Yellanna had been chased and severely beaten by the upper-castes when he was rushed into crowd to see the street play from close quarters. In course of time Yellanna’s emergence as a vibrant dancer and singer; his performances of Urumulu Nrityam and Veedhi Bagotam stamp the voices of their aggression and acts as cultural sites of resistance. Yellanna performances were highly adorable and as artist he wove new songs as “those songs appeared new. Hunger, land, tears, Malas, Madigas – the songs were full of them” (91) and that untouchable body housed a wonderful living art. The real artistic genius of Yellanna has been surfaced into forgettable realms entirely because of his caste identity. Another important figure to mention in this generations Narigadu, his son Naganna and Mataiah. Untouchable people are not supposed to enter the regions where the higher-castes live. But, when floods affected the village, it was Narigadu’s fearless and brave spirit that saved the lives of the people by invading into the land of high-castes and finally Narigadu met with death from the high castes. Naganna, his son is the guru to Yellenna by whom he stepped into various art performances. After the death of Naganna, Yellanna left the village in a quest for his identity. He was roaming around villages and villages as “art was in their veins. In their blood. In the depths of their hearts. In their very sweat”. Mataiah is another hero to Yellenna Dinni as he beheaded an upper caste landlord Karanam who had exploited the untouchables to a large extent.

Every Malas and Madigas in the village of Yennela Dinni could not live without doing a bonded labour. The land here becomes the symbolic signifier of power and their immediate sense of belonging to their culture and tradition. The metaphor of land becomes the metaphor of life for them; the displacement and uprooting from the land is the displacement from life with multitudinous memories connected to the land. Separate tracts of land were assigned to the Dalit communities and any encroachments to their lands the upper castes would not tolerate it. Clearly evident as: “The upper castes would not tolerate the untouchables living on a higher plane. They would say that the Malas and Madigas ought to live in the lower regions. If they lived on the higher plane, the arrogance of upper castes would not tolerate it”. Facing floods, Dalit communities are caught in a turmoil situation as death becomes indispensable for them in between floods and upper-castes. “They tell us not to live on heights. the stream tells us not to live on low-lying areas. If we come to the top, they will kill us. If we are in the lower areas, the stream will kill us. No matter what, death is inescapable for those who entered” (Rao 35). Michel Foucault’s concept of Heterotopias needs to be introduced to describe the spaces that consider as ‘other’. He defines the crisis heterotopias as a space at of sacred, forbidden or privileged.

Likewise, there exist some spaces of the upper castes that are considered as something privileged where the Dalits cannot enter.

In the backdrop of colonialism, the whites were more engaged in the exotic life of 'others' and started to administer the way of life, culture and literature. Even though whites took control over the nation and the administration was taken by them, the condition of Malas, Madigas and other lower castes remained the same as "caste, untouchability, criminal acts, looting - nothing ended" (Rao 63). The contradiction between high art/ low art and how the colonialism affected the literature of Telegu is an important aspect of the novel. A white man named Brown in search of the gems of Telegu literature excavated many puranic texts, Vedas and they passed off even those that were not Telegu as Telegu. Brahmin pundits flocked around him to get their history presented on the pages but they forget the real genius like Yellanna as with no opportunity for the real Telegu word to be unearthed and to be preserved. The incongruity between these is evident:

As if justice was ever done to the lives of Yellannas! Their emotions were betrayed. The injustice done to their word and speech is not significant. They took the life out of people's culture... The art, the literature, and the culture outside the temple became those of the ordinary people. All the lifeless struggles inside the temple became art and came to the fore (Rao 98).

To be born in a certain caste is to bear the brunt of that identity throughout their life. The birth becomes the fatal accident to determine one's identity. The binary opposition between purity and pollution sustains the practice of untouchability in a hierarchical social order implying the ideological concept of caste. This is clearly evident when Yerra Gollalu came to the ooru for the performance of street plays. Upper caste people such as Karanams and Kapus have assigned places close to the performers whereas the Malas and the Madigas would be far away from the platforms. Dumont observes that to sustain the Hindu tradition and the vedic values, there's a need to maintain the dichotomy of caste purity and pollution. If the Brahman is thought to monopolize the sacred, this may be thought to imply that the Untouchable is non-sacred and purely mundane, despite the threat his impurity represents for the Brahman.

The agonies and sufferings of the past by the people like Yellanna has been further passed onto generations. Long battles of their survival and the ruckus they create for their voices to be heard are persistent throughout the centuries. As days and ages pass by, the excruciating conditions prevail the same in connection with Dalits. The men of each generation are entrusted in their life span in the quest for an identity rather than the labelling them as "untouchable". Seemingly, the criticism spews at Manu, the creator of untouchability who propounded the dharmas and the principles of the caste system. Exclusively, the monopoly of the upper-castes is sustained as "even if its utterly obscene, what the Brahmin speaks alone is the Veda. Whatever is spoken by them alone. Only when they utter, Sanskrit becomes Sanskrit. Telegu becomes Telegu. Finally, even if English has to become English, has to spoken by them" (Rao 99).

The next generation of the Mala community is represented by Sivaiah, Yellanna's son and his wife Sasirekha. Severe droughts began to affect Yennele Dinni, as the hunger deaths increased in Yennela and its surrounding regions during their period. Having lost all their elders in the drought, they started to migrate

leaving their villages in search of job, food and overall better future. Even though they pass through their highest calamity, the only thing that was prevalent was caste. All they had was caste. The caste outside the four castes. A castaway caste. All the struggles were to live and the midst of all these tumultuous events, the caste became their identity. Searching for a job, Sivaiah and Sasirekha reached the digging of the Buckingham canal. Irrespective of caste and creed, even higher caste people were working there to alleviate their poverty. When Sivaiah asserted that he was a mala from Yennela Dinni, the other coolies started to hurl mud pellets and began to chase them. Sivaiah realized that hunger and labour too had untouchability. His body was untouchable. His Sasirekha's body was untouchable (Rao 142).

Various sections of the untouchables were converted into Christianity by the foreign Christian missionaries. Sivaiah and his wife too had been converted to Christianity. Martin, a converted Christian and a preacher of Jesus came into their life. Adapting to the new way of life, their only way to save their life from the heart wrenching pain of untouchability and hunger was the conversion to Christianity. "A Brahmin had not touched him. For him the body was untouchable. A Reddy had not touched him. From him too the same. The same for the rest of the castes. Untouchable. If touched, it was so low that it could pollute ( Rao 159). Sivaiah becomes Simon. Search for an identity for Sivaiah finally ended up in Christianity but in vain. There too, the feeling of an untouchable was heavily worsening the condition. There was no instance of attack on Brahmin Christians but affected only the Malas and Madigas.

Sivaiah's son, Reuben became a converted Christian and a preacher in a hospital at a very young age. Through the Reuben's memory, it was his wife Ruth who narrates the whole tale of Yennala Dinni. By building a house in Yennalla Dinni, Reuben's seeks for identity culminated in the rich ancestral heritage and tradition of the past. Following generations represented by Immanuel and Jessie believed in the armed struggle to bring a revolutionary change in the society. Their aim was to uplift the Dalits from their tormented condition through an uprising and by taking weapons in their hands. In that journey, the bloodshed of many people including Immanuel can be seen and Jessie still continues the journey to create a better world for the Dalits. Other important characters of this generation are Ramanujam and Lingareddy. Ramanujan also believes in the armed revolution and through his character Rao exposes his discontent with Gandhiji for his use of the word 'Harijans' to denote the depressed class and opines that with this word he has made the Dalit communities orphans also. Lingareddy is Gandhi's disciple but his hypocrisy is evident when he makes a procession of Dalit communities to the temple. Merely he makes the Dalits to stand outside the temple and purifies the temple as if it has been polluted by the untouchable classes.

Apart from the world of males and their valor acts given due importance in the novel, it's utmost necessary to delineate the representation of subaltern women in the novel. A stark contrast compared to other women representations, all the female characters deserve a mention. Through the characters Boodevi, Subhadra, Sasirekha, Ruth, Mary Suvarta and Ruby of several generations; they are presented as very courageous and brave. All the characters question the practice of untouchability and their hearts burn with anger by visualizing their communities burdened under the hegemony of the upper-castes. But, all the characters are also sidelined and subjugated under the power of men and their narratives only occupies a miniscule position in the novel. Although, they challenge the caste norms and gender prejudices; they fall under the patriarchal dominance

and superiority of men. All the characters in the novel are entrusted with motives and efforts to uplift the Dalits from the abyss of untouchability and caste prejudices.

## Conclusion

Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* is a crucial indictment and testimony of the lives of untouchable communities in Andhra Pradesh and the depressed Dalit communities in general. Covering different generations of people belonging to subaltern community, Kalyana Rao outlines the erasure and subjugation of the Dalit communities from the written histories with the overpowering presence of the dominant classes. Situated outside the canonical structure, Rao has constructively articulated his concerns regarding the caste-consciousness and Dalit identity in the novel. Rather than the caste identity, the novel attempts to explore the identity created through the art forms, folklores, oral history, culture and tradition. *Untouchable Spring* challenges the literary historiography and with an unconventional narration, the novel itself threatens the art of writing a novel. An influential composition in the history of Dalit literature, Rao's *Untouchable Spring* proposes that the revolts, struggles and the sacrifices of the untouchables will not immobilize in the following years and definitely their spring will be touched in the further generations by imbibing songs of their past in their hearts.

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