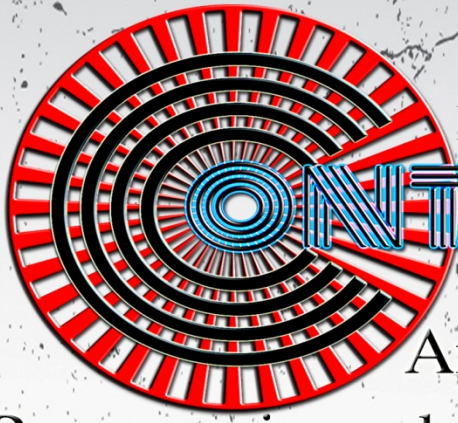


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Article

The Politics of Representation: Cultural Appropriation and Ethnicity in Kalyana Rao's Untouchable Spring

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Abstract

Dalit identity and its literary representation have long been a contentious field of discussion. The translation of Kalyana Rao's masterpiece Untouchable Spring into English brings to focus many issues such as cultural appropriation and subversion of mainstream assumptions about dalit life and ideology. How primitive art forms were modified and reinvested with lively energy, how education and missionary support opened up opportunities for a better life, how the struggle for one's self respect often led to deeper realization about the nature of human life and relationships—the paper takes into consideration such focal aspects as raised in the novel and further tries to trace the origin and development of this mass discontent that intended to transform the pattern of social hierarchy altogether.

Dalit literature originates in and is nurtured by the cult of rebellion and protest. By definition it associates itself with the underprivileged and the marginal and attempts to retain zealously a separate identitarian distinction. What is interesting to note is the attempt at subverting and appropriating the dominant cultural code from within the normative fold of its rituals, customs, myths and social institutions. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* epitomizes this struggle from within and unveils a deep core of mistrust of the mainstream representation (as the writing of the poems by Ruth, the subversion of the creation tale or the onstage dramatic representation of myths/legends/folk songs suggest). The act of (re/over)writing in itself becomes a tool and a medium for the empowerment and visibility of these people. Long repression, repeated and failed attempts at speaking up, an imposed history of shame and humiliation, the unending course of persecution have led to the flourishing of an untouchable spring—of colour and beauty, of song, dance and creativity—that has evolved out of and continues to touch many lives.

Over the last few decades, dalit writing has further evolved in the line of revolt with a direct call for complete alteration of the social order. The politics of identity has attained newer dimensions with the proliferation of published material in writing as well as a wider spread of consciousness among the urban populace about history, memory and representation:

The past three decades particularly have seen a flourishing of popular dalit literature, pamphlets and booklets, which have emerged as a critical resource for deeper insights into dalit politics and identity. Dalits themselves are disentangling received knowledge from the apparatus of control. This literature brings fresh hope, as it is believed that now dalits are in charge of their own images and narratives, witness to and participants in their own experience. They are rescuing dalit culture from degeneration and stereotypes, and bringing in a new dalit aesthetic. They are not the "Other", and are themselves articulating critical questions of choice and difference. (Gupta 1739)

Untouchable Spring is the story of the Telugu-speaking world of Ruth and Reuben—of Boodevi, Yellanna and Subhadra, of Sivaiah-Simon and Sasirekha, of Immanuel, Jessie, Mary Suvarta and Ruby. It is not a life but the course of untouchable lives that the author has attempted to capture, the unrecognized stream of art and culture that mainstream upper-caste social order had sneered at and suppressed. This work of fiction is at the same time autobiographical and representative, ethnic-religious and secular. Introspectively it searches the origin and depth of casteist animosity and extraneously interrogates the reach of such feelings. The questions that continue to be asked receive no answers, the search for escape routes turn futile. And out of this hopeless helplessness, out of the habitual fatigue of being tortured and incriminated over centuries rises the craving for revolt, the need to make one's voice heard.

The plot of the novel weaves a complex interface between the folk culture of the *malas* and *madigas* of Yennela Dinni—a small forgettable village close to Ongole at the turn of the century with its usual caste structure, poverty and ignominy for the poor untouchables—and the leftist uprising at Sreekakulam and Telengana armed struggle. How the peace-loving, hardworking farmhands and agricultural labourers of these so-called lowly castes turned to violence and armed resistance is interrogated with sensitive understanding.

It is interesting to note that the novel begins with a reference to Ruth—a celebrated author of books and a narrator herself. The novel, though narrated from a third person perspective, focuses on the sensibility of Ruth, who in her modern ways attempts to 'weave' the tale of pain, suffering and dispossession hounding the subaltern consciousness of *malas*, *madigas* and the like into creative writing. In a way she carries on the legacy of *Urumula Nrityam* and *Veedhi Bagotam* (types of folk performances) of Naganna and Yellanna through her stories and narratives. But she also tries to locate the eye of the storm of discontent in the wistful sad note of 'Listen Subhadra' folksongs and the romantic address to the revolutionary-hero figure in Ruby's poetry. The female voice seems to gain greater confidence with the passing of time as Sharmila Rege (1998, 2000) and Anupama Rao (2007) point out in their extensive discussion on locating women in the scheme of things. Questions related to eco-feminist perspectives, of patriarchal dominance within and beyond the colonial set-up, the role of dalit women and creative artists vis-à-vis the capitalist-communist interface in a globalised world require sensitive analysis and understanding. In her discussion on Telugu poetry by dalit women Challapalli Swaroopa Rani notes the emergence of the independent 'dalit' creative voice:

The alphabet is now a weapon in the hands of 'untouchables' - a weapon to attack the oppression perpetrated by brahminism for centuries. Dalits denied learning and respect, have now crafted self-respect from their humiliation, strengthening their castes and destroying 'sanatana' values and traditions. People who have been denied a basic humanity and have been outcasts for centuries, have now stormed into literary avenues, roaring. Today 'untouchable' voices rule Telugu literature. (WS 21)

Times have perhaps changed, the note of repetitive oral rhyme has given way to the cultivated measured feet of modern day verse, but the note of pathos underlying it remains unchanged. Reuben has inherited suffering at birth and he hands it down to his son and grandson. But the stage was set a long time back with the child Yellanna unknowingly trespassing into the upper caste arena in order to watch the performance of a late night play from close quarters. Before he could understand what his fault was he was lashed with palm fronds and is mercilessly beaten up. It is then that he learns what it is to run for life, what it is to be blamed, abused and

driven out of one's rightful inheritance just because one is an untouchable—a knowledge that frightens the untouchable's soul and bows his head down in pain and shame:

Who is that terribly distorted one that prepared the scene and the stage for Yellanna? If it is the yerra gollalu, they would not practice untouchability with Yellanna. When he went to see them, when he pushed his way into the crowd that was watching, when that crowd was of upper castes—that Yellanna should not be in that crowd, that if he were there, his back would be lashed with palm fronds, that he would be chased till blood flowed, that he would have to cover his naked waist with the blanket of darkness...Who is that half man who drew the line on Yellanna's forehead and on his life?...

Revenge, anger, tears. Filling Ruth's heart, filling Ruth's thoughts...after all these years...after generations...when so much of sadness turning into a stream is encircling her. (*Untouchable Spring*15-16)

This is the beginning of that long struggle to gain recognition and self-respect. Yellanna found his freedom in the songs he wove, the myths he enacted; the re-telling of old tales became a way of reinvesting them with the hard truths of the 'untouchable lives'. The pain of the landless labourer who grew the crop every year but could not take the harvest home, the yearning of the workers who worked for the landlord day in and day out without wages, the sorrow of the mother who lulled her starving child to sleep every night singing lore, the humiliation of the untouchable youth who could not enter the upper caste *ooru* wearing sandals or a headgear or even holding his head high—all seem to consolidate in the songs, dance, plays and such other cultural activities of these people. The novel asserts that though these art forms were the earliest predecessors of celebrated performing art forms of the present times, this is not recognized; the art of these suffering people, too, has remained 'untouchable' to the mainstream culture critics and the traditionalist upper caste connoisseurs. The Indian society is broken into a thousand pieces not merely because of poverty but because of this caste system which alienates these low caste people from the rest of the human society and projects them as mindless, faceless servants meant for dirty menial work. A talented mala or madiga child continues to be stigmatized by his/her caste and can never gain social ascendancy in a caste-ridden society which terms the rise of the subaltern as anti-religious and even criminal. Christianity provides a way out of this ignominy and neglect. Still, the attempts turn out to be illusory as Martin and Sivam-Simon find out. Even after conversion to another religion, 'untouchables' remain 'untouchables':

The conversion of malas and madigas to Christianity was happening like a movement. Incidents of thousands of people being baptized on a single day too were making news. On the other hand, there also began attacks on Christians. It is better to say attacks on mala and madiga Christians rather than on Christians. There was no news of attacks on choudhary Christians of the Krishna district...There were no instances of attacks on brahmin Christians...All that happened affected only the malas and madigas, the untouchable Christians. (*Untouchable Spring*168)

Martin is killed by the upper caste people for daring to oppose them and Simon carries his corpse to the village. Reuben is born with that blood-memory embedded in the collective unconscious. Thus the cycle continues—from suffering to death to rebirth, from torture to tolerance to revolt.

The novel moves back and forth in time, in the narration of recorded history—interspersing it with the voices one never heard. It is a representation of history from below—a subversive tone arguing for causes never given adequate space, an intellectual enquiry into the ‘other’ perspective of truth. The death of the innumerable Naxalite/communist leaders (many of them were not leaders but mere rebels from the untouchable communities) in police “encounters”, the invasion of the palle of the untouchables in search of arms and ammunitions (which, most of the time, were never found), the authorized interrogation by government agencies (such as the law and police) into the whereabouts of the so-called political extremists (which most often amounts to the beating and rape of poor women, terrorizing of children and inflicting unbearable physical torture on the untouchable men) are depicted realistically in the novel through the representation of police attacks on Avalapadu and the forcible suppression of Telengana Armed Struggle by the state. Viewed from this perspective, British colonialism in India ended not in the freedom of the individual but in the appropriation of power by the upper caste Hindus who with the authority of the state power continued to deceive and exploit the low castes, the untouchables:

In this country, the air one breathes has caste.
The water one drinks has caste.
The field canal that flows and the land that yields harvest has caste.
The school, the temple and the village square have caste.
The food one eats, the house one lives in and the clothes one wears have caste.
The word one speaks has caste.
Literature and culture have caste. (*Untouchable Spring*227)

Thus the presentation of an alternative culture and literature becomes significant. The earlier modes of dance drama, musical folk performances or rhymed oral poetry evolve into the more sophisticated forms of prose and verse with the spread of education brought about by Christian missionaries. Yet the connection with tradition continues unsullied. Ruth and Reuben renovate their ancestral house at Yennela Dinni and try to relive the past through their association with the present discontent among the working and laboring classes. The music that inspired Yellanna still moves Jessie but he hums the tune on his solitary mission towards freedom and equality.

The reconstruction of the accepted, traditional myths too in a way helps in subverting the hold of the dominant ideology on collective imagination. Interpolation and unconventional interpretation of these myths turn the anger on the lop-sided narration where birth determines access to power and authority. One such cycle of myths, as narrated in the novel, postulates the origin of the untouchables in the wrath of the gods, in the transgression of celestial norms and the resultant curse of an ignominious life on earth that would last till eternity. What the tale did not apparently emphasize but what becomes transparent through the use of caustic irony was the eternal truth of exploitation, slavery and injustice. Chennaiah and Jamavanta are welcome to their menial task of looking after the cow Kamadhenu or disposing of the corpse of the dead cow and cooking its meat for the gods but are eternally barred from tasting the milk or the meat. When they attempt to move beyond these limits the curse is pronounced. Interestingly, the malas and madigas as offspring of the mythical Chennaiah and Jamavanta face the same fate down the ages. They were the earliest inhabitants of the land—the *adivasi* or the *girijan* but have lost the right to their own land. They put in all the labour in ploughing and farming – sow the seed, water the field, tend the corn, reap the harvest and even thrash the grain on the granary floor but cannot take the harvest home. They do all the menial work for the upper castes in the village but cannot draw water from the only tank or well of drinking water in the village; they follow all the biddings

of the upper caste communities unquestioningly and are still thrashed and beaten up on the slightest pretext. They provide food to others but die like cattle in flood or famine. Eternal hunger, eternal poverty, illiteracy and subjugation seem to be the fate of these people. The imaginary birds *Yennela pitta* and *Ponnangi pitta* hold the structure of the novel together. They turn out to be symbols for that elusive freedom, openness of mind, love and affection – the search of which has driven these poor people from place to place, from faith to disillusionment. The overall pattern of myth with which the novel begins is rounded off with the letter from *Yennela pitta* (Ruth) to *Ponnangi pitta* (Jessie). The grandmother writing to the beloved grandson, the author of imagined tales writing to the leader of mass struggle, one untouchable writing to another – culminating to the mythic tale of the two birds answering to each other's call in the dead of the night.

Ramanujam, Immanuel and Jessie dreamt the dream of that free and fruitful existence that drove innumerable activists of Sreekakulam Girijan Struggle and the peasant and coolie movements of the seventies together. Satyam, Kailasam, Bhaskar, Ganapati, Panigrahi or Nirmala are representatives of those unsung heroes who gave up their lives fighting for the cause of the poor and the underprivileged. Even then, if the British colonial rulers wanted to trace the origin of folk poetry in India the Brahmin *pundits* intervened as mediators. If the malas and madigas underwent religious conversions to avoid the peril of complete physical and spiritual annihilation the upper caste people punished them with death as the episodes of atrocities on mala or madiga Christian converts at Cheemakurthi or Markapuram show; so does the killing of Martin:

Martins and Sivaiahs believed in Christ to get rid of untouchability. They believed in him to appease their hunger. More than anything else they believed in Christ to save themselves from being hunted by men. Whether Chinnodu became Martin or Sivaiah became Simon, they did so only for this reason.

Strange. John Paul Reddys, Immanuel Sastrys, Joshua Choudharys sprang up. When Yennela Dinni's younger karanam's son-in-law appeared in religious congregations in Nellore, Simon was surprised...Simon was unable to imagine both the crucifier and the crucified under the same roof. (*Untouchable Spring* 166-167)

The novel therefore, is not merely a translation of a Telugu masterpiece into English, but it translates or rather, trans-creates the nuances and crises of dalit identity into a different language, making it available to the wider readership across the other language speaking communities of the nation and beyond. It brings a flicker of bright radiance in the overpowering gloom of the vicious circle of continuing poverty, shame and indignity. It ends on that high note of optimism where Jessie and Ruby continue the struggle of their forefathers. Many will fail, but a few might survive and thrive. The politics of representation that prioritizes mainstream literary writings is emphatically challenged in the novel's representation of the art forms of these people. They embrace performing arts and later literature not as manipulative strategies or devices but as pure expressions of those feelings that the society suppresses. Thus it foreshadows the spread of knowledge, the international mobility and rising self-confidence of the new generation dalits that Vivek Kumar (2004) commends:

The mobility which dalits have attained in different countries has motivated them to assert that they are not inferior to any one. They have argued, "look we have demystified the ideal type image of dalits as dirty, drunkard, devoid of any merit, beast of burden, etc, by developing ourselves without any governmental help". In the same vein, "by attaining the mobility in different realms of foreign society without the help of the protective discrimination we (dalits)

have made a point that nothing is inherently wrong with us. It is only because of lack of democratic social conditions in Indian society that we have lagged behind. If we are provided a democratic social order we can also perform like any other person and will not need any type of reservations". (115)

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Short bio-note on the contributor

Dr Baisali Hui is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Kalyani, West Bengal. She did her doctoral research on Indian Partition writing, and was trained in the study of linguistics and English language teaching at CIEFL, presently known as the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad. She has published about thirty articles in national as well as international journals on both literature and language in English as well as Bengali. She has also been engaged in post-Ph.D. research at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla, a UGC Inter-University Centre for higher research in the humanities, during the period 2009-2012.