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## **Text as Resistance: Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as an Alternative History**

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### **Abstract**

“Awareness of the changing power relations seems to have dawned first upon the lower rungs of the hierarchy” – while talking about the rise of political consciousness among the people during the colonial period, G. Aloysius points out that the lower caste people were the first who tried to change the power structure of the society utilising the colonial opportunity. From this point of view, the present paper will look at G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as a record of the lower caste uprising, as an alternative history of generations of oppressed people. The uniqueness of the *Untouchable Spring* – the difficulty in categorizing it into a particular genre, will be utilised in order to substantiate the point on how a text as such can be transformed as a resistance. Apart from the text, the characters within the text and the events described in the text are all examples of everyday forms of resistance by Dalits. The present paper will try to analyse the various forms of resistance portrayed in the text.

### **Keywords**

Dalit Literature, Alternative History, *Untouchable Spring*, G. Kalyana Rao.



Alternate history or alternative reality is a genre of fiction consisting of stories that are set in worlds in which one or more historical events unfolds differently from how it did in the reality. It is also called allohistory (literally 'other history'). Alternate history 'concerns itself with history's turning out differently than what we know to be true'. Alternate histories can act as a form of counter-memory through which the minorities or the suppressed people bring out their version of the history which is hidden from the mainstream. This genre of literature was used by many radical writers around the world. Dalit writers have used this extensively during the contemporary period and Kalyana Rao also has used the same technique in his work *Untouchable Spring*.

History is a process of recording the events and important activities of a particular community for the future descendants of that community. Though this practice of maintaining historical records is a fairly recent phenomenon in Indian context, when this activity came to practice, a few privileged people utilized it and recorded their own history and their version of history of other people too. The upper caste people of India, when they recorded the history, they recorded it from their perspective and they did not even recognize Dalits and their lives worthy enough to be recorded. So, until recently, there was no record of the lives and other events of the Dalit community except their statistical records. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people from the Dalit community started writing and they told their own version of history. This history was different from that of the mainstream history and was shocking to many people and many people refused to believe it. But the Dalits claims it as the authenticated history of them. The work that I have chosen, *Untouchable Spring* is one of the finest examples of the alternative history put forth by the Dalit community. Thus, in this paper I have tried to point out the many uniqueness of *Untouchable Spring* from a theoretical perspective and its contribution to the corpus of Dalit literature which is gaining popularity in the contemporary world.

In his seminal work *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, G. Aloysius traces the emergence of the nation and nationalism in the Indian context. In this text he argues that the lower caste people were the first who tried to change

the power structure of the society utilising the colonial opportunity. Because of their continuous oppression by the upper caste people in the form of caste hierarchy, when they saw a way to escape from their present state they tried to utilise the opportunity. Aloysius points out that “awareness of the changing power relations seems to have dawned first upon the lower rungs of the hierarchy” (54). He categorises the political consciousness among the lower caste groups into three types, 1) Against the ideology of ascriptive hierarchy, 2) Fleeing the stranglehold of caste slavery and 3) Against caste-feudal land relations. With this theoretical background, the present paper will look into the novel *Untouchable Spring* in order to locate the various political consciousness that the author is depicting. This paper will also focus on the technique through which the author is making the text itself as a resistance.

*Untouchable Spring* is the life history of a family which is integrated with the socio-cultural history of the Telugu Dalit Community. Through the mode of oral storytelling, the author narrates the saga of generations of Dalit lives and the art forms that plays a major role in their lives. The story begins in a small village called ‘Yennala Dinni’ and the narrator is Ruth who is recollecting her husband Ruben’s tales of his forefathers and their struggle for equality and dignity. Five generations of Dalits form the context of this novel, starting from Yellanna, his grandfather and followed by his father Sivaiah, his son Immanuel, and his grandson Jessie. Being born as a Dalit all of them without exception face severe oppression. Time and context might have changed many things but the plight of Dalit community remains the same, and still they have to fight for the self-identity and self-respect in the highly oppressive social system. The fight was taken to the rest of the people of Dalit community by means of traditional dance forms, songs and plays, which are imbued with the reality of their everyday experiences to which the mainstream arts keep a blind eye. Kalyan Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* is the story of those arts which tries to bring out the pain in the hearts of Dalits, who are deprived of human rights and dignity in the society.

This work is an outstanding record of the life of Dalits. By combining many generations of Dalit lives, Kalyana Rao have weaved an epic for the Dalits. Throughout the work he criticizes Gods, who are supposed to be the creators of human beings with caste difference; Manu, who wrote the *Manusmriti* which is used by the Brahmins to suppress the lower caste people; the upper caste people, who oppress Dalits. He asks many questions like, “what is literature?” Whether the imaginary writings of the upper caste people which has no life in it or the writings of the lower caste people which is very much alive and related to their day to day lives and sufferings. Though many other Dalit writers have criticized the upper caste people and their atrocities, no one has severely criticised the canonical writings, which is again determined by the upper caste people, as Kalyana Rao does in his work.

*Untouchable Spring* can be called a novel or an autobiography or a historical novel or a social biography or an epic. It is a novel, because this work narrates the story of at least five generations of people. It is an autobiography, because of its connection with the author’s personal life and his ancestors. It is a historical novel, because of the parallel between the incidents in the novel and real history. It is a social biography, because it necessarily talks about the Dalit community and their social and personal life. It is an epic, because of the grand style which the author employs to narrate that make his characters great heroes. The narrative technique which the author uses in this work is interesting: Reuban has narrated the story to Ruth and after his death, she recollects that story and she narrates it to the readers.

As an autobiography, this work has a close resemblance with K.A. Gunasekaran’s *The Scar*, in which Gunasekaran talks about the arts and artists of Dalits. Gunasekaran who was very much interested in folk arts was not encouraged or not given permission to perform in temples because he was a Dalit. Similarly, in *Untouchable Spring*, the malas and madigas were not allowed anywhere nearby the performance stage and Yellanna was beaten up and was forced to run away because he came very near to the stage. Later when Yellanna and Naganna were performing those plays among Dalits, the upper caste people

did not like it and the reason given by Atchireddy and Karanam was that they should not call the pedda mala and pedda madiga to the stage, was just a silly reason to stop them from performing the play. One more incident which is equally silly is the origin story of the malas and madigas where the gods curse them to be lower caste till eternity just because Jambavanta and Chennaiah didn't divide the meat of the Kamadhenu into two and putting a defiled piece of meat into the cooking. If this is such a big crime to punish them for eternity, then what is the punishment for the gods who first of all got the idea of eating the meat of Kamadhenu? Kalyana Rao also criticizes Manu for writing the *Manusmriti* which is equally horrible. Kalyana Rao calls him 'half human, half animal', 'the terrible distorted Manu', who created the rules of the caste system.

In this novel one can note that the earliest political consciousness of the Malas and Madigas against the caste-feudal land relations. The earliest heroes that the author is talking about in this work is Narigadu and Mataiah. Narigadu and Mathaiah were slaughtered because they dared to raise their voice against their landlords. The next step of political consciousness among the characters in the novel is their effort to flee the stranglehold of caste slavery. Even after many generations of Dalits sacrificing their lives for the betterment of their future, they felt it very difficult to escape the stranglehold of caste slavery. So the only solution was to leave Hinduism behind which was founded on caste hierarchy and to convert to Christianity which they felt was egalitarian in nature. But very soon they realised that even within Christianity caste hierarchy is prevalent. Therefore the author finally points out that an all-out fight against the ideology of ascriptive hierarchy is the only way to do away with the problems of Dalits and he also points out that armed struggle might be the way ahead.

Another interesting thing about this novel is the way women characters are treated. The author does not stop at making the men as great heroes, but he ventures to make Dalit women also their equivalent. The characters like Boodevi, Subhadra, and other silent characters such as Mary Suvarta are as brave as the men, and without their support their men would not have achieved greatness. As mentioned by the translators, though the author gives importance

to the female characters, it cannot be considered as a story told by women for women. But this work is to some extent different from a canonical male writing in the sense that in this work the women characters are portrayed as independent and self-willed. Even if their husbands are not there with them they can manage their own life and they can look after their family too. This is evident in characters like Subhadra and Mary Suvarta. We can find similarity between this work and Bama's *Sangati* in which the author talks about the difference between the upper caste women and Dalit women. She says that the lower caste women have more freedom than the upper caste women and this is evident in *Untouchable Spring* also.

The author does so many things in this novel and one such notable thing is its criticism of the literary canon and the upper class art forms. Throughout the novel the author asks why the Dalits are not allowed to speak out, why their art and literature are not being considered worthy enough to be included in the literary canon. The 'mala bairagi' dies of hunger, but would the same thing have happened if he were from the upper caste? The irony is that, leave alone appreciating their art form, the Dalits are not even allowed to perform their art form among themselves. Their art forms and their literatures are not being recorded because the Dalits were not allowed to get education and the educated people didn't consider them as worthy enough to record. He also adds that this literature is a kind of revolt against the upper caste people and because of this reason the upper caste people either ignored it or did not accept it as literature at all. The author continuously criticizes this mentality and forces the literary historians to reconsider their history and literature.

The author can be called as the most radical of the Dalit writers because throughout his work he talks about the struggle of the Dalits to make their life better but their attempts fail because of the atrocities of the upper caste people and their narrow minded nature. Throughout the work, he repeats the sentence "a lot to be dug, a lot to be filled" many times in order to insist upon the need for change. So, at the end the author suggests the Dalits to join the armed struggle in order overcome their problems. He has created characters who had become

naxalite and he himself propagates that he is a naxalite. Though other Dalit writers have struggled hard for their betterment, none of them have turned towards the armed struggle or they had not mentioned it openly. This work tries to give a solution to the problems of Dalits by suggesting armed struggle. The author criticizes Gandhi and his use of the term 'harijan', which he says is nothing better than the mala and madiga.

*Untouchable Spring* shows that the Dalit community has moved a step forward in their struggle for emancipation. As caste-Hindus did not treat Dalits as their equals, they converted to Christianity. Even in Christianity Dalits were oppressed. A parallel can be seen in Bama's *Karukku*.

The problem of translation is one that is being discussed again and again in the context of Dalit literature. The idea, that none other than a Dalit can write Dalit literature, can also be applied to translations. One more thing that is to be considered in the field of Dalit translation is that, when a Dalit writes in her/his own mother tongue, they use the colloquial language which they use in their day-to-day speech. Instead of using the standard written language they use their colloquial day-to-day language because they want to overthrow the upper caste domination in the field of literature also. The Dalits use their dialect as a tool of resistance. But in translation this tool of resistance is lost and one of the major purposes of Dalit literature is itself compromised.

In this work, the author also talks about English and English people. He says that the Brahmins, who were saying that everything was there in the Vedas, suddenly changed and saw everything under the feet of the white men. He criticizes that the upper caste people simply imitated the white men and started learning their language too.

As an alternative history, *Untouchable Spring* is unique and contains many historical records that is not found in the popular histories today. The great famine occurred during the year 1977-78 which destroyed many lives of the Madras presidency. The Buckingham canal work was extended in order to help the people. This is the recorded history, but there is another side to this history which is not recorded officially. Even in the canal work, Dalits were not allowed



because all the workers and even the officials were from upper caste and they did not want Dalits working along with them. This detail is recorded in the church records and Kalyana Rao brings them to the light. This is one of the millions of incidents which were left out or manipulated in the official historical records of India. That is the reason I call *Untouchable Spring* as an alternative history which tries to foreground the history which many people don't know except a few who were directly involved in them. The term 'alternative history' may give a derogatory sense as it connotes that there is already a history which is partly true and authentic and the alternative history will add the missing piece to that history and in that process will create a new history, instead. The term alternative history in the present paper means the part of history that is left out and which needs to be recorded and authenticated.

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