

Recuperation of Alternative Ethnographic History and Politics of Dalit Conversion in *Untouchable Spring*

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Abstract: *KalyanRao in Untouchable Spring as a true Dalit Counter-narrative explores untouchability as a category as a category that is not insulated from political formations. Discursive practices of historical erasures, pre colonial feudal exploitation, Hindu scriptural orthodoxy, primitivism, and Neocolonial operations structure and reconstitute untouchability. Rao chronicles the lives of ethnographic minorities in Andhra Pradesh to whom the privileged entitlements of constitutional equality and citizenship are not extended in the postcolonial nation state. In the historical formation of the newly independent decolonised nation state these various ethnographic minorities such as the Malas, Madigas, Mahars, Bhangis and Chhamaars are excluded from the operations of colonial and postcolonial modernity. This revisionist novel recuperates and restores the lost ethnographic and anthropological heritage of the Malas and Madigas, as well as acts as a historiographical Ur text for the lost art forms of the dalits. Rao's text thus acts as an alternative history exploring and recovering verse forms, songs, dances and performative texts expelled to the margins of the established canonised Brahminical literary tradition. These subaltern art forms are not documented in the pages of respectable, "scholarly" documents, both colonial and postcolonial archives since in India caste is more important than art. It is revisionary as it fills the aporias in official history; it talks about social structuring of labour organisations, of land settlements, wages and economic changes in society. But these multiple narratives blur and become indissociable, as mythology and folklore, religion and politics become indistinguishable.*

Keywords: Untouchability, Historiography, archival, ethnographic, subaltern

1. Introduction

Untouchable Spring makes a cultural statement first through its structure (breaking temporality of past and present to show how the Mala past permeates, infiltrates and co-exists with their Christian present), and then through its focus on the creative potential of the art forms of the Dalits. Rao through Ruth engineers a kind of literary archiving in which he recovers and restores into prominence many folk art forms which have been kept on the sidelines of canonical Telugu literature which is monopolised by Sanskrit literature. The *Veedhi Bagotam* and *Chenchunatakam* show the dissolution of the hierarchical spatial demarcation between the stage and the audience, the audience are no longer passive recipients of meaning but become active producers of meaning as well. It becomes a communal performance and thus does not become dead like the written word but is alive, breathing and constantly being revived, reworked and renewed as people themselves add new songs and verses. Vemana's verses, Yellana's songs do not become dead like tradition rather they are passed as cultural inheritance and thus kept alive, they lack permanence and fixity rather they are forever being renewed as they are being sung by Untouchable peoples who weave their stories in these songs and it is this fluidity and lack of structure which ensures their cultural vitality. Tradition is not imposed on the Malas rather they create their own tradition, lore, myths and legends derived from their everyday struggles. The folk drama and these folk songs lack structure and thus through their defiance of rules, and structuration they practice a rebellion against the standards and formal logic of Sanskrit drama and versification just as the language of the *dvipada* unleashes a semantic violence on the tradition of sophisticated versification. Thus, art in the novel works as a strategy for not simply the recovery of the lives of the Malas

who practice such arts but also shows the Dalit art's historical continuity as it survives on the margins of mainstream canonised art. The Telugu title, is *Antarani Vasantam*. The word *Vasant* indicates spring, but the *antarani* or "untouchable" refers both to the caste and uniqueness, the pristine, pure yet distant spring; thus the title has multiple evocations.

The novel *Untouchable Springs* by KalyanRao is a historical document excavating the lost anthropological and ethnographic heritage of the Malas and the Madigas as well as a historiography of lost art forms. According to Rao, the sacredness of India is established and consolidated by defining firm caste boundaries and identifying the "impure" and "expendable" in opposition to whom the purity of the Brahminical creed can be defined. For Rao, the Vedas, religion and Manu are not testaments of faith but of casteist prejudice and of rendering people "impure" such as the *mangas*, *mahars*, *bhangis* and *chamars* in Maharashtra; the *Malas* and *Madigas* in Telugu. The elitist religious documents such as Vedas and Puranas are identified as not "word of God" but as exclusivist and elitist documents, as espousing not an inviolable truth but a Brahminical version of truth and thus they are robbed of their divine status in the Hindu Literary ecclesiastical tradition. For Naganna, they are documents filled with deception and treachery. Just as the Brahminical and Upper caste "oroo" has excommunicated the Mala and Madigas, the Sanskrit Puranic and Vedantic tradition has pruned, censored, expurgated the stories, myths and legends of the Untouchables. By restoring into literature not simply the folklores and the parables of the Malas, Rao intersperses into this personalised history of a Dalit Christian family, the history of the folk theatre and lost verse forms such as the *dvipadas*.

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The dvipadas crafted by the potter Pedakoteswarudu are part of an ancient verse tradition which has remained in the sidelines of traditional established literature. It is a natural literary work which defied the proscriptions of the pundits. *Basavapuranam* and *Veerasaivaliterature* are crafted in dvipada. The dvipada transgresses semantic limitations and grammatical boundaries of formal prosody and rhyme. It is “unpurified” and unexpurgated unlike scholarly language. Basavadu was a religious revolutionary who revolted against Brahminical cult in Southern India. Rao also gives a place of prominence to literary historians such as Brown who collected the verses of a true Telugu poet Vemana which were languishing in anonymity. Vemana practised a mutiny in semantic terms by writing verses which challenged all kinds of rigidity and orthodoxy; his poetry was almost a social document of his times as it engaged with religion and contemporary politics. The Pundits frowned upon such versification and dubbed it uncouth and unsophisticated lacking formal polish. Rao’s text thus acts a research document exploring and recovering verse forms, songs, dances and performative texts expelled to the margins of the established canonised Brahminical literary tradition. These arts are not documented in the pages of respectable, “scholarly” documents since in India caste is more important than art.

Most notably the novel adopts the oral style of an epic, but this is not an epic about grand royal sieges but rather an epic about struggle, survival, revolt and about permanence and irreversibility of caste and untouchability. This epic literally has a cosmic scale as it begins with myths of origin and creation; showing how mythology (brahminical version) is tainted with caste prejudice. It then goes on to discuss politics and caste, and the continuing contest generation after generation between power-wielders and the downtrodden. Wading through the life of different generations – Yerrenkadu and Boodevi, Yellana and Subhadra, Saivaiah and Sasirekha, Ruth and Reuben. We finally come to Saivaiah who converts to Christianity. If the novel is a repository of lost art forms or an alternative history then the collector/recollector is Ruth; the widow of Reuben and a fifth generation Mala. There is a silent assessment as to what losses and gains accrue after conversion. Rao asks provocative questions – Does anything change through the intervention of modernity and of a new faith? Or do things continue as they were, with the black master Karnam replaced by White master. There is a great sense of loss as Ruth sits mourning a past, a past which uncovers and resurrects the forgotten struggles of the Mala people. According to Rao, it is only in Church records that the history of the Malas and Madigas can be found. Ruth does not simply recollect and transmit the social struggles of her ancestors but of the whole Untouchable community, she also becomes a conservationist and restorer of the literary heritage of the Malas and Madigas as we get to know of the *UrmulaNriyam*, the *VeedhiBagotam*. The narrative refuses to work chronologically, and in its retrospective glance it refuses to spell out any clear linearity perhaps to suggest that Untouchability corrupts and vitiates the past and the present. The reader has to draw alike on the history of the two communities – Malas and Madigas - as well as the history of the colonial rule (the official history) which has interestingly been relegated to the margins. There are certain

dominant narrative strands such as the oral tradition of story telling –the stories told by Yerrenkadu and Naganna to Yellana, the stories told by Boodevi to Yellana, by Reuben to Ruth and finally by Ruth to the readers. There is the theme of exile –Yellan’s escape from YenellaDinni, Naganna’s escape, Saivaih’s migration. Just as the feeling of exile is a recurring motif in every generation as rebels escape to survive the onslaught against them; similarly the persisting powers of the landowning Karams and Reddy’s becomes a refrain. The image which the author hauntingly evokes is that of the dalit being pursued, running away and followed by a crowd of prosecutors, armed with hearts of steel and weapons of death, signifying a persistent attempt to crush them.

Conversion was a negotiation that could be entered into both individually or collectively; Chinnodo becomes Martin and Sivaiah becomes Simon through individual acts of resistance and caste defiance. Rao philosophically explicates the necessity of conversion by identifying the dalit life as a perennial perdition, an eternal process of social ostracisation and victimisation; of martyrdom thus emulating the life of Christ. Without any wrongdoing they “bear the cross”, the cross of infamy, humiliation and social stigmatisation; they are pierced by “spears” of upper caste hatred and sacrificed at the altars of a casteist society. In fact in Nellore, Christianity itself becomes desacralized, instead of becoming an instrument of erasing the untouchability of the Dalit Christians; the Christian missionary consciousness is derided as a revolutionary consciousness as it unsettles the privilege of caste and restores dignity to the lives of the untouchables. Martin’s perspicacity in recognising how being employed by the upper caste Reddy’s and Choudhary’s for the disposal of cows actually ensnares the Mala in a vicious circle of caste ridden obligations such as making slippers out of the skin of the dead cattle ensues in a commandment to all adherents of the faith to spurn cow meat. His Christian consciousness is not only benevolent and spiritual but deeply involved with the political struggles and reality of the Malas, his doctrines are not abstract pronouncements from the pulpit sanctifying debased labour which reduces human beings to the level of scavengers fighting for putrid and rotting meat of dead cattles. Rather they are social doctrines and politically encoded maxims engaged with the reality of “untouchability”; rather than preaching the lesson of passive resignation it teaches the logic of defiance and disobedience to people like Sinenkadu.

In Vemana’s poetry like in *VeedhiBagotam*, God is anthropomorphised, his divine halo is extinguished. There is no mythologisation, no divinisation and ecclesiastical speculation in his verses or the songs of Mala Bairagi. Rather they spring from the everyday world of the Untouchables and poor, it mimics the daily rhythms of their day and catalogues their rigour, their hunger, their pain. The songs of Yellana thus become an alternative history of the lives of the Malas interweaving within it their lives, their vocations and their arts obscured in official records of Precolonial and Postcolonial history. Vemana’s verses and Yellana’s songs thus become political pamphlets, radicalising the singing masses as they engage with contemporary political issues such land grabbing, irrigation,

organisation of labour structures apart from evoking the beauty of nature, seasons, rain, fields etc.

Caste subdivisions are often region specific; in Andhra Pradesh dalits are polarised into the Malas and Madigas. The Lutheran Church in Andhra Pradesh is confined to the Dalit community. The Madigas constitute only a part of this with the Malas occupying a dominant position. As such upper caste discrimination does not exist inside the church though at the social level it still persists. The author points out that the church itself stands as “a parallel site for the construction of honour” parallel to that of the temple. The solidarity within the church also enables them to bargain for political and social concessions in their constituency. Acts of violence against them persist but the consolidation of the community makes the evangelical mission a political force to contend with. The fact that the Lutheran Church in Andhra has no outside funding and is wholly dependent on its members is a contributive factor to the solidarity and sense of equality. It is “symbolic, social, political capital that Lutherianism offers”.

Ruth the hospital nurse is the silent link in this Epic saga spanning multiple generations, carrying forward the narrative from beginning to the end. It is a narrative consisting of personal memories, heard fragments, songs, lives lived by the people of earlier generations - all reflected in the depths of their experience. Ruth's husband Reuben was the hospital Pastor; he is dead but he is “always her present” and so is the young boy Yellana running away in the dark or Sivaiah migrating to Nellore as migrant Labour. She is a poet, a storyteller - and so was her husband, “he told stories. Wove poems. Laughed and cries as he narrated”. She recalls his physical presence as her “beautiful untouchable man”. His narrative of memory has a mythopoeic quality about it. There is an imaginary Yennela Pitta/bird, and the Hindu myths found in the Vedas and Purana are re-examined, reworked, reformed, and transmuted to correct their prejudiced nature and transferred to the world of the Malas. Thus, it a rich amalgam of mythological narratives and ancestral tales, folklore and local legends like that of the potter, of Mala Bairagi and Subhadra as Paratamma, touching both the empirical and the imaginary, and the material and the spiritual. UrmulaChinappa and Naganna both show how the vedantas are tainted with caste prejudices and are not the word of God but rather the word of God as interpreted by the Brahmin Pundits, as appropriated by the upper castes to offer a divine justification for social structuring and stigmatisation. Yellana rejects the title of a Vedantist since the Shastra Spewing vedas are not as natural, fool blooded as his songs which are embodied in the lives of the struggling mases; rather than anoint himself as a scholar or Vedantist he becomes a people's poet, a “man of the dust”. It is in the fields and rivers that he recreates and writes his own “Vedanta”. In Naganna's retelling and revisionary parable, it was not Bhagirath but the Urmula people who brought down Ganga to the earth and thus they became the carrier of live, the founders of agriculture and the first cultivators. Thus, the history of human civilisation is intertwined with the history of the Malas. The story of Kamadhenu shows how the whole Untouchable race is born out of a curse, the impurity of the cow's meat gives birth to an “impure” race in the Kaliyuga.

Thus, a fictive myth is offered as an explanation for the condition of their lives which has remained unaltered since genesis.

Yellana was illiterate, his songs are not transcribed in any book but they were performed; his songs travelled both in time and space. With their human birth, their human bodies and their human feelings, it was difficult to comprehend these artists, these weavers, these craftsmen being cast away to the margins of society as social detritus and waste. Even when they watched the *Chenchulakhmi* play, they stood on the outskirts of the crowd, just as they lived on the outskirts of the upper class habitations. When these boundaries are crossed like by Yellana, they are persecuted, chased and often killed. Like Naganna before him, Yellana caught in a “same old tale” runs away from YenellaDinni to escape his persecutors, he gets lost and wanders, driven to despair by fear and stigma of his caste. Ruth wonders who it is that has created their lives. The finger points to Manu, who gave birth to the first man and created the castes, Ruth sees in Manu a distorted mind that failed to recognise the human in them. As the naked Yellana (stripped of his caste identity momentarily and reclaimed by nature and Urmulaand refashioned as an artist) walks in the dark, he feels the beauty of nature in which the stars look down from the sky and Ruth observes “There was no untouchability in this union. There was no caste in this movement. There were no four parts within it, no fifth outside it”.

The early part of *Untouchable Spring* moves forward in short, poetic leaps, and in spurts of creative outbursts. As Yellana's feet dance the reader begins to respond to the rhythm that crosses all barriers and merges the dark Siva with Yellana. The child finds himself saved by “Urmula”, the dance of vitality performed during the gangayatra, the river becomes a protective Goddess and deity of the Urmula people. As the narrative of different interwoven lives (Yerrenkadu, Boodevi, Yellana, Naganna) come together a networking of past begins to fall in place. The beginnings of violence are traceable. Naganna inherits the urge to survive and to defy from his father who teaches him that “we aren't born only to die...we are born also to kill”. In fact for the Malas, rebellion is not an “ideal”, it is a necessity; their revolutionary heroes are Poladu and Mattaih, people who do not find any mention in Precolonial and Postcolonial histories. However, every act of survival demands a sacrifice, Naganna's father is one such sacrifice.

Caste politics, colonialism and being condemned as bonded labour to the Karnams define the world of Yeneladini. Amongst the various recurring features is also a periodic reference to Reuben, who like his ancestors had narrated the histories of his family and community, recited poetry and created art. Yellana marries Subhadra but it does not stop him from becoming a wandering ascetic, he creates a song and dance performance for his community, restoring a kind of centrality to them both in its enactment and in the audience. But the dissolution of structures in the inauguration of the performance, of unseating and reversing age old customs of waiting for the Karnams and paying obeisance to them invites upper caste wrath, compelling them to dislocate the centrality of the Dalits, a centrality which they had attempted to project through writing,

enacting and performing for a Dalit audience, giving them seats in the front and not merely standing on the fringe as observers.

Yellana continues to travel, dance and sing using everyday language and describing everyday experience of marginalisation; he comes closer to the wandering ascetics, the Bhakti poets and experiences a sense of freedom by severing himself from the bonds of domesticity. He comes to be known as Mala Bairagi, the ascetic who renounced the world. His songs are disseminated through the singing voices of the field labours and migrants, they flow through a chorus of “untouchable” voices. The potter Pedakoteswarudu is another artist who wishes to transfer Yellana’s songs into writing but this attempt is foiled by the upper caste who waylay pedakoteswarudu, snatch his papers, burn them (an act looking back to the Brahminical censorship of literature born outside of the temples); thus another death is caused in the attempt to continue the dalit literary tradition. Back home, Yellana’s son Saivaih grows up, marries Sasirekha and becomes a migrant coolie, still an “untouchable” and still cursing the “beheaded civilisation” of his country.

Saivah becomes the author of the conversion narrative as he converts into being Simon. Many others convert to Christianity to erase “untouchability” from their bodies and in their innocence ask “Now is this body like a Brahmin’s which can touch everything? Can touch everyone?”. Reuben is Sivaiah’s son in the fifth generation. Two generations follow him Immanuel and Jesse. But their struggle against the half-hearted accommodation of Gandhian thought by the society which still denies them access to forbidden spaces despite a provision in the constitution against Dalits, the fading of the dimly realised hope offered by the communists against police atrocities, the upper class onslaughts, floods and droughts, hunger and persecution still continues. It is not a small thing to desire dignity and have choices. However, caught between religion and caste, how far can they run away from their own selves? By the end of the novel, things do not seem to have changed much :”Everything is a war. A long struggle”.

The experience of conversion has not really helped the Dalits to escape their caste of origins and find rehabilitation in a new ethos, no matter of which faith; exclusionary spaces continue to pose a threat to both individual identity and the democratic tradition primarily because of their refusal to recognise difference and heterogeneity. The multiple strands of the narrative of *Untouchable Spring* are marked by the circular design of Reuben and Ruth’s dialogic narration, in keeping with the recurring image of the Dalit being on the run continually and then rising against resistance. The novel devotes individual sections to reclamation of lost folk arts and their restoration and thus is a revivalist narrative. It is also revisionary as it fills the aporias in official history; it talks about social structuring of labour organisations, of land settlements, wages and economic changes in society. But these multiple narratives blur and become indissociable, as mythology and folklore, religion and politics become indistinguishable. A vision of the miraculous envelops the heroic struggles of the Dalits as new myths and new epics are created. The continuities of history create a parallel

aesthetic of language and style, the dents made by the conversion are not deep enough to isolate them from their encroachment of their cultural pasts.

References

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