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## Rewriting Histories - A Struggle for 'Self Identity' as a Human Being: Reading of Untouchable Spring and Outcaste: A Memoir

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The present paper is an analysis of the two novels written in different regions and cultural context, but renders almost the same history of Dalits' plight and struggle against the established social system. The paper foregrounds that Dalit literature is integrally related to Dalit movement, and that it paves way for the 'self identity' of Dalits. Also, it will try to locate the two specific narratives within the Dalit literary movements in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. As the selected novels narrate the history of conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, the paper will also analyse this new phase of Dalit life.

Dalit literature contests written histories where the entire life and cultural heritage of these specific set of people have been neglected. Only a literature of their own can express the real life experiences and their history. The movement which began with Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Ambedkar with the message, "Don't let your pen be restricted to your own questions" (Nimbalkar 32 - 33) is genuinely carried out by Dalit writers, to awake, to emancipate and to make them realize that every human being is equal. In course of this development, Dalit authors' pen not only restricted to mere proclamations of equality, liberty and fraternity but also tries to make Dalits proud of their origin by highlighting positive aspects of their culture and acknowledging various Dalit art-forms. The two biographical novels taken for this paper, Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* from Telugu and Dr. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste - A Memoir* from Marathi, are faithful to these aspects.

Both, Kalyan Rao and Dr. Narendra Jadhav represent a part of an awakened and educated Dalit community, focusing on their past, which is not found in written histories. They belong to the generation of struggle and assertion. The similarities between the two writers go further when we see their progressive shift from an untouchable to one of the recognised and well identified personalities in present literary and socio-cultural scenario. Kalyan Rao is a writer, a Dalit, a Dalit Christian and also a Dalit social activist. Similarly Narendra Jadhav, a Dalit writer and a converted Buddhist has also put his marks as an acclaimed Indian bureaucrat, economist, thinker, social scientist and educationist.

*Untouchable Spring* is the exemplary story of a family where the plot is integrated with the socio-cultural history of Dalit community. Rao has used the tradition of oral storytelling to narrate this saga of generations, in which, along with the social and cultural life of generations of Dalits, their art forms too play a major part. Readers are transported to the heart of an abominable social system and to the lives of the suppressed Dalits in 'Yennalla Dinni' as Ruth recollects her husband Ruben's tales of his forefathers and their struggle for freedom. He narrates his grandfather Yellanna's life, his father Sivaiah's life, his life story, his son

Immanuel's, and his grandson Jessie's lives, turning it into a compendium of five generations. Being born as a Dalit all of them without exception face an ordeal of fire. Time and context might have changed many things but the plight of Dalit community remains same, and still they have to fight for the 'self identity' and self respect of a human being in the orthodox social system. Mindful of this task the awakened and rational minded Dalits have started bringing awareness to the rest of the people of this 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 the identity as a human being in the society.

Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* concerns with the story of three generations of a Dalit family. Damu the central character of the novel belongs to the first generation and it is written in the first person narrative, from Damu's point of view. The story is all about the transition of an untouchable Mahar caste family from its poverty stricken life to an educated, dignified and recognised family, struggling against all odds of conventional caste codes prescribed by the society and religion. It is the story of Damu Runjaji Jadhav, the uneducated, engine mechanic in Mumbai Railways and his sons, Jayawant (IAS), Sudhakar (Employee at Gulf Air, Aeroplane Company), Dinesh (Administrative Officer, at Mumbai Municipal Corporation) and Narendra (Economist & Social Thinker); his daughter-in-law, Vasundhara (Professor, at Siddharth College, Mumbai) and his granddaughter Apoorva (Student, Walter Jonson's High School, Washington). Each one narrates their own story keeping Damu in centre, as he is the root and the foundation from whom springs the transformation of the whole family. The novel is the memoir of all his endurances, in his own words, along with the words of each family member.

Both *Outcaste: A Memoir* and *Untouchable Spring* are not only saga of two Dalit families in the novel form but also a history of the entire Dalit community, from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh respectively. Both novels represent socio-cultural conditions of the Maharas in Maharashtra and Mala and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh. Whereas the movement in Andhra Pradesh has taken a radical way of assertion, in Maharashtra it is polite and political, under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. In one of his speeches at Mahad on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1927, Dr. Ambedkar says, addressing the untouchable community, "untouchability is not a simple matter; it is the mother of all our poverty and lowliness and it has brought us to the abject state we are in today" (Dangle 267). Those words of Dr. Ambedkar from eight decades away are still relevant in the case of Dalits in most of the parts in India.

The incidents of Naganna's death and Yellanna's expel from the village in *Untouchable Spring* justifies the above statement. The germs of assertion that Narigadu sowed inside his son Yellanna, grew through his art form. Being an artist he was looking forward to use his art as a medium to bring awareness in the Dalit community which in turn is viewed as a matter of disrespect for caste Hindus of ooru, Yellanna Dinni. The usual performance begins by showing respect and taking permission of the so called elders of the 'ooru', with a customary address to them as, "Has the Karnamgaru come? Have the Kapus come?" (Rao 79). Disregarding this tradition in Atelladu's performance, the sutradhara Naganna comes to Yellanna Dinni with a determination to give voice to the Mala and Madigas of Yellanna Dinni and to raise against the

tyranny of orthodox caste Hindus through his art form Bagatam. He attacks the age old custom of addressing elders of the 'ooru', by addressing the elders from the Mala and Madiga Palli. He begins the performance addressing them as 'Have the great 'pedda mala' and the 'pedda madiga' who is as great come?' (Rao 79). The upper caste arrogance was not tolerant towards this change, as if they had been put to shame and consequently, the performance of Bagatam was banned. The self respected and determined Naganna could not bear the defeat, which he had been suffering throughout his life and the trauma eventually led him to his grave. Naganna's death left Yellanna alone in the battlefield, reminding him of his father's oath, 'We aren't born only to die . . .' (Rao 35). Following this sudden blow from the destiny and the orthodox social system, a discarded Yellanna leaves village, leaving everything behind, to find way to his art by creating a collective awareness throughout the Andhra Pradesh.

The plight of Damu, the central character of *Outcaste: A Memoir*, is not different from that of Yellanna in *Untouchable Spring*. Damu was born in Ozar, a village in Maharashtra, where the first seeds of a Dalit upstart was beginning to grow. Like the other states, Maharashtra also has the hold of caste hierarchy, but Damu was reluctant to perform his Yeskar duties. Yeskar is a village duty assigned to Mahars like guarding dead bodies, cleaning dirt, and removing dead animals. These duties are assigned to them by birth and Damu is not exempted from that; he was even severely beaten up by the caste Hindus for refusing to perform his duty. After the forced duties and day's toiling they are given Baluta as a remuneration of their work. Damu expresses his agony, while explaining Baluta, "How can I take to begging door to door? Baluta is our right, they proudly claim! My foot! Have you seen how they throw the food? I don't want rights as a dog. I want my human right . . . if we just think about filling our stomach, how are we any better than animal? (Jadhav 19)." Eventually, due to his utter helplessness under the tyranny of custom and system Damu decides to leave his native place and set his foot towards Mumbai in search of a better life instead of toiling for a day's food in his casteist orthodox village. Both, Yellanna and Damu's decision to take leave from their native place has become a hallmark of historical exploration of their heritage.

Yellanna's journey is also an exploration of the magnificent heritage of a Dalit community, which have been neglected and put behind the curtain by the uncensored power of the social system. Kalayan Rao himself makes some of these aspects clear in an essay which talks about 'The story behind the story' of *Untouchable Spring*:

That's true – my ancestors lived really outside the village. But they were inheritors of the magnificent culture. Great artists. Litterateurs too. They did not know how to write. They'd weave songs. Weave poetry. Weave *padams* . . . mine is that weaving heritage. That's magnificent. All that magnificent has become untouchable. Has been suppressed . . . In this country, more than art and literature caste has become important. Art and literature have been assessed in perspective of caste . . . that's the great tragedy . . . Why is that so? Antarani Vasantam is an exploration of this. (Rao 114)

And Damu's journey in the *Outcaste: A Memoir* is also the discovery of the inherent quality of a human being who can achieve any post he desires irrespective of his caste. It is an exploration of the truth that it is not the birth that defines an individual as untouchable, a useless being who

cannot attain anything other than toiling in the dirt. While disclosing the greedy politics of the hierarchical religious and caste system to put Dalit as Dalit for ages, it enlightens the Dalit community to think high and to move forward in life as a human being of self respect. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's observation of the novel substantiates this view:

Like life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, or indeed the life of our beloved former President, the late Dr. K. R. Narayanan, the life story of Dr. Jadhav is also a story of change, of great courage, of progress, of hope . . . Narendra's autobiography must shape must shape our social and political vision. It must shape our educational policy. (Dr. Manmohan Sing)

In the process of unearthing the hidden histories of a Dalit community, both *Untouchable Spring* and *Outcaste: A Memoir*, focus on the Dalits struggle to find a way out of their suffocated lives under the casteist social system. In *Untouchable Spring*, Yellanna go on visiting Mala and Madiga Pallies from one village to another singing his songs to awake and make them realise their sad predicament. But unfortunately the drought brings an end to his songs, which serves as his foot prints for future generations to follow.

On the other hand, Damu, inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's message, educates people to bring rationality and courage in their personality and to understand their value as a human being. He determines to work hard to give good education to his children, for they can be rational and can live with dignity instead of toiling in the sun, as was his fate. Fortunately, the children fulfil his aspirations and rise to high positions in their chosen careers, where they work for the upliftment of their society. Jayavant becomes an IAS, and works enormously for the downtrodden wherever he gets an opportunity; Dinesh, as an administrative officer at the Mumai Municipal Corporation, has taken the task to contribute for the development of Dalit and derailing people of the society. And above all Narendra, the youngest son of the family, has achieved something more than Damu's expectations by contributing not only to the development of Dalit community but to the whole Indian society as well. He has given his best as an Economist to implement the policies for the development of Indian economy; as an educationist, he brought a drastic change in the field of education being the vice chancellor of University of Pune; and he is still contributing his best for the betterment of society as a social thinker.

Inculcating the revolutionary ideas derived from their ancestors, each generation of the family move ahead in the battle of freedom and search for an identity. The drought brings an unconventional change in everyone's life irrespective of caste and creed. People had to leave their villages for the food and water. As it is with everyone, Sivaiah, the third generation of the family of *Utouchable Spring*, begins his journey with his wife Sasirekha towards the south, hearing that they can get work at the Buckingham canal. One thing that gets cleared after the drought was that caste and untouchability is not easy to cast off. Even this dreadful rampage of nature fails to cleanse the psyche of caste Hindus. After a long and dreadful journey Sivaiah and Sasirekha reaches to the canal only to be turned away by the caste Hindus working there as coolies. They do not agree to the Malas and Madigas working along with them, so along with other untouchables, they chase away both the husband and the wife.

That brings them to the place where they experience the warmth of humanity, something their religion is indifferent to. Yes, the new religion of Christianity brings a ray of hope in Sivaiah's life. Martine, a Christian brings them to his home and gets them baptised. But converting to Christianity was not an end to their struggle; instead it has taken new turn. In this country not just Mala and Madigas, but Brahmins, Reddys and Chaudharys too become Christian. Though a Christian their hierarchical position remains undisturbed as Ruben narrates:

I heard the song too . . . the son in law of the younger karanam of Yellanna Dinni . . . Immanuel Sastry . . . though he became a Christian, he hasn't lost his tail. The 'Sastry' remains. John Paul Reddy. Joshua Chaudhary . . . Though the religion has changed, the caste hasn't worn off . . . (Rao 174)

Thus, a part of untouchable's lives has changed converting to Christianity, but the never ending battle of superiority complex is still ahead of them.

The condition of the Mahars in Maharashtra is not different than that of the Mala from Andhra Pradesh. Though, under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar they are converted to Buddhism, their identity as a Mahar or a scheduled caste or an untouchable Buddhist is still there. Innumerable narrative incidents in *Outcaste: A Memoir* vouches this painful reality.

As, the pages of the novel turns over to the next, book seeks to provide an alternative history, the lost history of the Dalits disregarded in the pages of socio-cultural greatness of the main stream society. In the translators note, translator Alladi Uma and Shridhar write:

The novel also questions the so called authenticity of the 'written' histories. Mainstream histories, he (Rao) complains, do not represent the truths regarding the way certain communities have been treated. He says that . . . the Buckingham canal – a historical event that the text tries to represent, kept out off standard histories. He claims to have excavated this from Church records. (Rao 278)

In this way, the protagonist of both the novels uses convenient ways to find out their unexplored roots and identity of the lost generation. On the one hand, in *Untouchable Spring*, Jessie like Sivaiah and his son Rueben, choose the path of armed struggle and at his every step he says, "It's okay for us to die so that the poor of this country can live freely" (Rao 258) and on the other hand, Damu's family chooses the battle of rationality and education to fight against untouchability. The newest of this generation, Apoorva, Dr. Narendra's daughter, who is pursuing her studies at Walter Jonson's High School, Washington says, "I identified who am I? I'm just a Apoorva, without a label of any religion, a global citizen. Nobody makes me realise now that I'm a Dalit and if somebody is doing that I don't care, they have the problem and they need psychiatric treatment" (trans. mine, Jadhav 287). That is where, history has an immense importance in an individual's life; as Dr. Narendra Jadhav reminds his daughter Apoorva, "To those who forget their past, future never forgives" (trans. mine Jadhav 287). But, what about those whose history is not found in the pages of mainstream historical records? What is there to remember for those who do not have their history as such, where they can look back as their own? This is the plight of a Dalit community who have always been ignored and kept away, as they live outskirts of the villages where their wretched and ignoble lives are kept out of reach of

the historians. That is where Dalit literature traces back their histories and experiences, and bring them to public eye. Dr. Narendra Jadhav's and G. Kalyan Rao's novels are serious efforts in this regard. Their ability to give voice to the voiceless, being once a part of that world and apart from it, is unheard in the Indian literary canon. And the novels come up with a note of realisation that further change is required, and appeal all the suppressed and vulnerable communities to come together and enable themselves through education and finally stand together as human beings irrespective of caste, class, race and religion. Therefore it is reliable and convincing to call them the writers who have rewritten the history of a people to find out their roots and their identity as human beings.

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