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The Untouched Daughter-in-laws: Representation of Dalit Women in G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring*

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Abstract:

G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* is an epic tale about the lived experience of the untouchables of India in general, and Dalits of Andhra Pradesh in particular. Although the text's major characters are male, Dalit women characters of the text seem to be equally powerful in their resistance and assertion. However, various readings of the text have projected these Dalit women as (the) other, as mere daughter-in-law. Those dominant readings have overlooked the Dalit women's resistance as secondary; as mere companions to the heroes in action. In this paper, I would attempt an alternative reading of the representations of Dalit women and try to build a counter image of Dalit women as opposed to the dominant image projected in the previous patriarchal readings by foregrounding their modes of resistance against various marginalization, is my ultimate attempt to revive the forgotten past about the heroic struggle of Dalit women. Since a Dalit woman's experience is different from her counterparts, both in terms of caste and gender, therefore, it is imperative that her mode of resistance should not be read using any single theoretical framework.

Keywords: Dalit women, dominant reading, alternative reading, resistance, counter image.

The past few decades have witnessed an emergence of Dalit literature, a major source for the better understanding of Dalit exploitation, resistance and assertion. Those literatures are not only tools for aesthetic experience, but also for knowledge formation, identity construction and also an alternative source for revisiting history. Unlike the literature written about them by various upper caste writers, they seem to have blurred the distinction between fact and fiction, by attempting to give a faithful representation to the lived experience of ordinary Dalit men and women and their everyday struggle.

G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable spring* is definitely an epic tale about the lived experience of the untouchables of India in general, and Dalits of Andhra Pradesh in particular. The text is a self-confessed historiography about the five generations of Dalit and their struggle against the social discrimination, cultural hegemony, economic exploitation, and political marginalization during different historical period. And in the course of history though their modes of resistance and assertion have changed from conversion to arm rebellion, but the fact that they are still treated as untouchable, and judged by their caste has

remained unchanged. Although the text's major characters are male, Rao nonetheless has portrayed powerful Dalit women characters capable of challenging the cultural norms, and changing the mode of history, even while situating their roles in various normative spaces and institutions.

However, in the Translator's Note of the *Untouchable Spring* 'Touch the Spring: An introspection' Alladi Uma and M.Sridhar said, "In *Antarani Vasantam* too there may be women like Boodevi who fill Yellanna with the desire to knit songs by narrating stories and exposing him to the theatre. Maybe it is she who is vitriolic in her anger towards those who beat Yellanna and chase him away. Subhadra may take the courageous step of diverting the water so that it reaches the fields of the Dalits. It may be Ruby who decides to join her husband in his armed struggle. There may be many other such women characters. But does this make *Antarani Vasantam* a story about women by a woman? Certainly not, it is here that we can see *Antarani Vasantam* diverging from Bama's *Kurrukku*. The generations that Ruth is so fascinated to talk about are of male lineage. The text is Ruth's memory of Reuben's memory. It is his father Simon's story. It is his grandfather Yellenna's story. It is his son Immanuel's story. It is his grandson Jessie's story. Yes, women do come into the picture but as daughters- in-law. Their husband's families become their own" (Uma and Sridhar 279).

Such reading of the representations of women coincides with the dominant patriarchal ideology that considers the position of women as the 'Other', their history as secondary. Such ideology not only valorises Dalit men's suffering as significant and glorifies their struggle as heroic, but consider Dalit women's victimization as negligible and their contributions in the Dalit identity formation as a historical. Reading the representation of the Dalit women in this mode, on a broader level, also indicates ways in which past is remembered and forgotten. According to Sharmila Rege, "Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forget a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance" (13). In this paper, I would attempt an alternative reading of the representations of above mentioned Dalit women individually and collectively, and try to build a counter image of Dalit women as opposed to the dominant image presented in the patriarchal discourses by foregrounding various modes of resistance used by them to counter marginalization so that a forgotten past about the heroic struggle of Dalit women can be revived; their reality can be seen and touched also. Since a Dalit woman's experience is different from her counterparts, as she is the victim of double marginalization, therefore, it is imperative that her mode of resistance should not be read using any single theoretical framework. Gopal Guru in his article 'Dalit women talk differently' argues that in order to understand Dalit women's need to talk differently it was necessary to delineate both the internal and the external factors that had a bearing on her constitution.

Untouchable Spring unveils with character sketch of Boodevi. Boodevi is not an outsider, not a daughter-in-law, but the paternal aunt of Yellanna, the first-generation Dalitman to question and revolt against the inhuman practice of Untouchability in Yennela Dinni. However, her representation is worth rereading because her affiliation was more towards (the) other daughter-in-law of the family than towards her own family members,

which the previous reading has overlooked. Boodevi was the first character of the text to assert her disagreement against caste norms. Even before the birth of Yellanna, Boodevi, asked her brother to raise the entrance of her maternal house. In Yennella Dinni, if the Mala's entrance was high enough for one to get in without bending down, then the ten generations of that Dalit family has to bear severe consequences. And even though Boodevi was aware of such consequences, she still asked her brother repetitively, "It would be nice to raise the height of the entrance, anna"(Uma and Sridhar 9). What is striking here is that she wanted the entrance to be raised for her sister-in-law Lingalu. She wanted her to raise her head high in a place where even the Pedda Mala, the caste headman, also keeps his head down in fear of "consequences." Thus, Boodevi was the first woman in Yennela Dinni to challenge the caste and gender norms. She was not only the pivotal source of inspiration for Yellanna's song and dance, who later on became a great singer and urumula dancer, but a rebel and an outspoken critic of caste structure. In another occasion, it was Boodevi, who gathered courage to question the authority of Dalit male power and the limitations of such power as compared to the uppercaste male power. When her nephew was chased away by the upper caste men, for coming near the tent to see the dance performance, she berated the caste elders for silently accepting the historical injustice done to them. But she remained as the victim of male chauvinism that cannot tolerate its status quo being questioned by a woman. Her husband pulled her hair and kept beating her till she was silent. Thus, Boodevi was first Dalit woman in the text to question the authority of male power and challenge the caste hierarchy; she is a counter image to the gender and caste stereotype, asserting her voice against exploitations and subjugation.

The next powerful Dalit woman character in *Untouchable Spring* was Subhadra. She was the next generation of Dalit Woman in Reuben's family who resisted patriarchy and untouchability till her death. Although she was born in the family of Mala, she was named as Subhadra. Her name itself was a challenge to the uppercaste hegemony of gods, religions and culture. Her naming can also be read as a kind of superimposition of higher caste morality and cultural value on a Dalit woman's body. Her second act of resistance was her hybrid dressing sense. She was the only Dalit woman, who dared to drape the sari down the knee length, wore leather slippers, nose ring and earrings, which was earlier an uppercaste phenomenon. This suggests her suppressed desire to transcend the boundaries of cultural norms. The colour of her body and her hair was in defiance of her Dalit body, she is the *chukkala Mugggukarra*, as beautiful as the pattern of the stars in the sky and hence Sulochannamma, the upper caste woman commented, "She looks like the Karanam's Daughter" (Uma and Sridhar 69). Such representation of a Dalit woman's body although seems to be romantic, never the less demystifies the notion that only upper caste women are the upholder of look physical beauty.

But Shubhadra was not only the upholder of such extraordinary physical beauty, she is also a powerful symbol of unyielding courage. Unlike the Shubhadra of *the Mahabharata*, she is not the sister of Krishna and Balaram, or the wife of Arjun, but a Dalit woman, a Dalit Daughter-in-law, a Dalit wife, a Dalit mother. She is the first Dalit woman, in the text, who took up arm to resist upper caste monopoly over land and water. When the Dalits were denied

water to cultivate their land, Subhadra took a spade and stood near the water canal and diverted the flow of water to save her family and her people from starvation. Unable to comprehend such a daring act on the part of a Dalit woman, the upper caste men and women and Dalit men declared that she was possessed with mother Goddess. Such deification of a Dalit woman's body exposes the general hypocrisy of men, their habit of denying agency and subjectivity to a Dalit woman body. They were unable to accept that a Dalit woman is also capable of changing the power dynamics; hence, they denied to recognize her act of resistance as her own and dismissed her assertion as an act of Goddess, and not of a Dalit woman's.

Similarly, Subhadra's relationship with her husband Yellanna was a complex one. In defiance of the gender norms of her time and society, where a girl did not have the right to choose her husband, she chose Yellanna for herself. She revolted against her father to get married with Yellanna. But Yellanna betrayed her, left her alone to bear the burden of domesticity and motherhood. And therefore, Subhadra was right when she questioned his love for her: "Why did he make her cry now? If it were a lie why it be like that?" (Uma and Sridhar 124). And he returned to Subhadra only before his death. Subhadra, however, like a dutiful wife waited for his return. And like a responsible mother, she crossed the boundaries of the domesticity and toiled hard day and night in order to give their son a better life. And like a good daughter-in-law, she carried forward the family tree by getting her son married alone. Thus, Subhadra's sacrifice, resistance against patriarchy and caste hierarchy is far more heroic than that of her husband, who proved to be an escapist.

Sasirekha was the next generation of daughter-in-law in Yellanna's family. She was a migrant labour, who was picked up as a wife by Subhadra for her son Sivaiah. Sasirekha's struggle is the struggle for survival. She was travelling from place to place to fight untouchability, hunger, draught. Like an ideal wife, she accepted the fate of her husband's identity and became converted. And in the process of constructing her identity by self-locating in the cultural "we", Sasirekha turned into a corpse. As she was converted, she was brutally killed by upper caste men in an attack on Dalit Christian in Valasapadu. In her short life, she proved to be a good partner, wandering from place to place for equal work opportunity for Dalits. Her martyrdom was no less significant than that of her husband Simon's.

Ruth was the next generation of Dalit woman in Yellanna's family; she was the daughter-in-law of Sasirekha, and grand daughter-in-law of Subhadra. She is one of the most important characters of the text owing to her position of being the narrator of the novel, and also because of the mythical nature of her bonding with her in-laws. Being an educated Christian, she didn't face the realities of Dalit life like her ancestors, but no sooner she became the daughter-in-law of the house, after getting married to Ruben, she searched for her Dalit identity in Yennella Dinni. She built the house there and had her first child there in that house. The identity of Dalit, the identity of a successor in the family of Yellanna was more important to her than the identity of Ruth. Her desire for *Yennela Pitta*, the mythical bird seen in Yennella Dinni that makes deafening noise was her first act of resistance when Ruben told her the story of Kamadhenu and the creation of caste system. Ruth's reaction to

the practice of untouchability against Yellanna is heart rendering: “Ruth turns into a volcano when she thinks of Yellena, of Boodevi, of Yennela Dinni and the cast-away lives, and when she is reminded of such instances.” (Uma and Sridhar16)

Being a writer herself, Ruth criticized *Manusmriti*, art, literature, canon, historiography for being narrow minded. According to her, the real subject matter of literature should be the life of Dalits, who have been treated till now as the ‘minuses’ in the history of India, hence, she expressed her anguish, “Why don’t researchers and historians think a bit carefully? Just as the land they toiled on did not belong to them, why has this wide knowledge become so narrow as not to acknowledge that it is they, who wove those songs that have survived? What is surprising is that there is no shame for being narrow mind. This attitude rules the literary word proudly.” (Uma and Sridhar 42). Thus, Ruth deployed critical strategies to resist the dominance of upper caste hegemony in literature and history in particular and life in general. By emphasizing again and again on the necessity for rewriting an alternative history from margin point of view, she remained as a speaking subaltern.

Mary Suvarta and Ruby were the next two generations of Dalit women in Yellanna’s family. Mary Suvarta was married to Immanuel, who was killed by the police for being a communist. In the war against class structure and caste system, endless waiting was her mode of resistance. She suppressed her womanly desire in order to fulfil the desire of her husband, and thus, sacrificed her husband and son for the greater cause. She waited first for her husband day and night to come back, and later for her son Jessie, who also left home to join the arm rebellion. Her waiting near the door and constant looking outside suggest her faith in the better future for Dalits. Ruby, the last generation of daughter-in-law, on the other hand, did not wait. She was a true feminist and a Marxist who challenged the norms of gender and class. She left the luxury of her house and secretly got married with Jessie, who was Naxalite then, and started working for woman organization for the upliftment of Dalit women. And finally, she left her family and join her husband in the arm rebellion against the feudal and administrative nexus to establish better future for the poor and the down trodden. Thus, her mode of resistance is as significant and historic as her husband’s.

To conclude, thus, alternative reading of the various modes of Dalit women’s resistance through the lens of representations, while one the one hand, adds important critical perspective to our understanding of the nature of resistance, on the other hand, reveals the gap between lived experience and representational reality. All these Dalit women Boodevi, Subhadra, Sasirekha, Ruth, Mary Suvarta, and Ruby resisted the gender and caste norms of their society by using various strategies, whether it is in the manner of questioning the nature of Dalit masculinity, or arm rebellion, or enduring in silence the hardship of Dalit motherhood, or critiquing the canon, all these pointing to their power and subjectivity not their victimization. They are represented here as agents and not just the instruments in the construction of Dalit identity and rewriting Dalit history. Dalit women emerged here not only as visible subject, but as conspicuous and larger than life characters.

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