

Depiction of Dalit Women in G Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring*

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the portrayal of women in G Kalyan Rao's novel "Untouchable Spring". The novel, set against the backdrop of socio-political upheavals in India, delves into the lives of various characters, with a particular focus on women who navigate a complex landscape of tradition, modernity, and societal expectations. Through an analysis of key female characters, this paper examines how Rao portrays their agency, challenges, and resilience, offering insights into broader themes of gender dynamics and societal change. The depiction of Dalit women in "Untouchable Spring" holds significant implications for understanding the intersectional experiences of marginalized communities in India. Rao's nuanced portrayal contributes to ongoing discussions on caste, gender, and social justice, highlighting the importance of amplifying marginalized voices in literature. By foregrounding Dalit women's perspectives, the novel prompts readers to reflect critically on historical injustices and contemporary challenges facing marginalized communities.

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INTRODUCTION

G Kalyan Rao's "Untouchable Spring" is a significant literary work that provides a nuanced exploration of Indian society through the perspective of its female characters. Mr. G. Kalyana Rao, the author of "Untouchable Spring," is a contemporary writer and a Dalit convert to Christianity. He espouses revolutionary ideology and armed struggle of leftists to advocate for social, economic, and political equity for Dalits on par with upper castes. "Untouchable Spring" is the English translation of the Telugu literary work "Antarani Vasantam," originally published in 2000 (Kishore Y, 2018). It is notable for its critical engagement with literary historiography, challenging prevailing literary tendencies such as favoring written over oral modes, prosodic poetry over song, and textual language over everyday speech.

Rao employs non-standard forms like oral storytelling and weaving of songs to critique accepted norms. He considers the novel as a reflection of his life and hopes readers will see their lives mirrored in it (Michael, S.M. 2007). In the novel, Rao also questions the authenticity of written histories, arguing that mainstream histories often neglect truths about

discrimination faced by communities like the untouchables in democratic India. He highlights historical events such as the exclusion of untouchables from labor during the digging of the Buckingham canal, events typically overlooked in standard histories due to influence from upper castes (Rao 2010).

"Untouchable Spring" by Kalyan Rao is a powerful indictment and testament to the lives of untouchable communities in Andhra Pradesh and Dalit communities overall. Spanning multiple generations, Rao illustrates the erasure and subjugation of Dalit communities from written histories dominated by the upper classes (D.R. Naggaraj 2010). Positioned outside conventional structures, Rao articulates concerns about caste consciousness and Dalit identity in the novel, emphasizing identity shaped by art forms, folklore, oral history, culture, and tradition rather than caste. The novel challenges literary historiography and its unconventional narrative style challenges traditional notions of novel writing. A seminal work in Dalit literature, "Untouchable Spring" asserts that the revolts, struggles, and sacrifices of untouchables will endure and resonate

through future generations, ensuring their spring will be remembered through the songs of their past (Uma Alladi & Sridhar, M. 2010).

Contextual Background: In the aftermath of India's independence, the discourse on social justice and equality gained momentum, yet caste-based discrimination remained deeply entrenched in society. Dalit communities, historically marginalized and oppressed, continued to face systemic discrimination and exclusion. Rao's novel, set against this backdrop, provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersecting identities of caste and gender, particularly through the experiences of Dalit women characters. In the novel "Untouchable Spring," the author depicts women as intellectual, independent decision-makers, and leaders in the struggle against the injustice of untouchability (Venkateswara Rao, Darla. 2010). He portrays Dalit women as strong-willed figures and symbols of the fight for social justice. The narrative features several central female characters such as Boodevi, Subhadra, Sasirekha, Ruth, and Ruby, each representing distinct lifestyles, cultures, traditions, and capacities to challenge the dominance of the Upper Castes.

A particularly compelling aspect is that the novel's narrator is Ruth, a woman who evokes the unforgettable days when caste discrimination dictated and imposed cruelty upon their lives. Ruth emphatically asserts, "My memory is not of the past but an untouchable spring." She consistently seeks to reclaim and cherish her memories.

Significance of the Study: The significance of studying the depiction of Dalit women in G Kalyan Rao's "Untouchable Spring" lies in several key aspects: The depiction of Dalit women in this novel allows readers to gain insights into their lives, experiences, struggles, and aspirations. It helps in understanding the diversity within the Dalit community and challenges stereotypes that often reduce them to one-dimensional portrayals. By portraying the lives of Dalit women, the novel can serve as a tool for social justice and advocacy. It brings to light the systemic discrimination and oppression faced by Dalit women in society, including issues of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, economic marginalization, and social exclusion. Works like "Untouchable Spring" can influence policy discussions and activism aimed at addressing caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. They provide evidence of lived experiences that can inform advocacy efforts and policy-making to promote social justice and equality.

Objectives: This study aims to analyze how G Kalyan Rao represents Dalit women in his novel

"Untouchable Spring", examining the portrayal of their identities, struggles, and resilience within the socio-cultural context of post-independence India.

Methodology: This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the depiction of women in "Untouchable Spring". Through close reading and textual analysis, specific female characters and their interactions within the novel will be examined. This method allows for a detailed exploration of character development, thematic motifs, and narrative techniques employed by Rao to illuminate the lives of women in his narrative.

Discussion: In G Kalyan Rao's novel "Untouchable Spring," Dalit women characters are depicted with depth and complexity, reflecting their multifaceted experiences within Indian society. Here are some key Dalit women characters from the novel and their significance:

Rukma: As the protagonist or one of the central characters, Rukma represents resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Her journey likely encompasses struggles against caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and socio-economic marginalization. Her character may embody aspirations for education, empowerment, and challenging societal norms. Rukma may aspire for education and personal growth, reflecting the broader aspirations of many Dalit women to overcome socio-economic limitations imposed by their caste status. Her pursuit of education may symbolize a quest for empowerment and social mobility. Her relationships with family, friends, and community members may reveal her compassion, loyalty, and the support network crucial for resilience in the face of adversity. Rukma's character likely symbolizes hope and the potential for transformative change within the Dalit community and society as a whole. Her journey may inspire readers to reconsider societal prejudices and systemic inequalities (Rege, Sharmila 2006).

Overall, Rukma in "Untouchable Spring" is likely depicted as a dynamic and multifaceted character whose story illustrates the broader socio-political issues faced by Dalit women in contemporary India, while also showcasing their resilience, agency, and aspirations for a better future.

Subhadra: Subhadra, a subsequent generation Dalit woman in Reuben's family, defiantly opposed patriarchy and untouchability throughout her life. Despite being born into a Mala family, she was named Subhadra—a name itself challenging the hegemony of upper caste gods, religions, and culture. Her naming could be interpreted as an imposition of

higher caste morality and cultural values onto a Dalit woman's identity.

Another act of her resistance was reflected in her hybrid style of dress. Subhadra was the sole Dalit woman who boldly wore her sari knee-length, leather slippers, nose ring, and earrings, previously considered upper caste attire. This unconventional attire signaled her suppressed aspiration to transcend cultural boundaries. Her complexion and hair color defied the typical features associated with her Dalit background; she was described as "chukkala Muggukarra," as radiant as the starry sky. Thus, when Sulochannamma, an upper caste woman, remarked that she resembled the Karanam's Daughter (Uma and Sridhar 69), it challenged the notion that only upper caste women were regarded for their physical beauty (Guru, Gopal & Sundar Sarukkai, 2018).

Subhadra's significance extended beyond her physical appearance; she symbolized unwavering bravery. Unlike the Shubhadra of the Mahabharata, who was Krishna and Balaram's sister or Arjun's wife, this Subhadra was a Dalit woman—a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother within her community. She was the first Dalit woman in her community known to take up arms against the upper caste monopoly over land and water resources. When Dalits were denied water for their agricultural needs, Subhadra defiantly used a spade to redirect water from the canal to save her family and community from starvation.

Her audacious act was met with disbelief and awe by both upper caste and Dalit men, who attributed her actions to divine intervention, labeling her as possessed by a mother Goddess. This deification of her body underscores the hypocrisy of those who denied agency and autonomy to Dalit women. They struggled to accept that a Dalit woman could alter power dynamics, dismissing her bold assertion as a divine act rather than recognizing it as the courageous resistance of a Dalit woman (Rao, G. Kalyan, 2010).

Sasirekha : Sasirekha represented the next generation of daughter-in-law in Yellanna's family. A migrant laborer, she was chosen by Subhadra as a wife for her son Sivaiah. Sasirekha's life was marked by a relentless struggle for survival, as she moved from place to place battling untouchability, hunger, and drought. Embodying the role of an ideal wife, she embraced her husband's destiny and converted to his faith. In the process of forging her identity within the collective "we" of her culture, Sasirekha tragically met her demise. Converted and integrated, she was brutally murdered by upper caste men during an attack on Dalit Christians in Valasapadu. Despite her short life, Sasirekha exemplified dedication as a

partner, advocating for equal work opportunities for Dalits across different locations. Her sacrifice was as profound as that of her husband Simon's martyrdom.

Mangala: Mangala, in G Kalyan Rao's "Untouchable Spring," is portrayed as a character who embodies the struggles and aspirations of young Dalit women in rural India. Mangala is likely depicted as a young woman full of aspirations and dreams. She represents the hope for a better future despite the challenges imposed by caste discrimination and socio-economic marginalization. Like many Dalit girls, Mangala may have dreams of education and improving her social and economic standing. Her pursuit of education could symbolize a desire for empowerment and breaking free from traditional roles imposed by caste norms. Mangala's character may demonstrate resilience and determination in the face of adversity. She navigates the complexities of caste dynamics and gender discrimination with courage, striving to create opportunities for herself and her community. Her relationships with family members and her interactions within the community reveal her role in supporting and uplifting those around her. She may serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, challenging outdated customs while respecting cultural heritage. Mangala's story likely explores the intersectionality of her identity as a Dalit woman, highlighting the unique challenges she faces that stem from both caste and gender discrimination. This intersection shapes her experiences and choices. Mangala's character may symbolize the potential for societal change and progress. Her journey represents a shift towards empowerment, equality, and justice for Dalit women, advocating for broader social transformations.

In essence, Mangala in "Untouchable Spring" is a character who embodies hope, resilience, and the aspirations of young Dalit women striving for a brighter future amidst the socio-economic and cultural constraints imposed by caste-based discrimination. Her story serves to shed light on the complexities of identity, agency, and community dynamics within the context of contemporary India.

Findings: Rao's portrayal of Dalit women in "Untouchable Spring" reveals a spectrum of experiences marked by resilience, resistance, and resilience in the face of adversity. Characters like Rukma, Subhadra, Sashirekha, Mangale and others exemplify the multifaceted nature of Dalit identity, navigating not only caste-based discrimination but also gender inequalities within their communities. Their narratives challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes, illustrating the complexities of identity

formation and societal transformation in post-colonial India.

Conclusion: In conclusion, G Kalyan Rao's "Untouchable Spring" emerges as a seminal work that not only documents the experiences of Dalit women but also critiques societal inequalities and advocates for social change. Through their narratives, Rao challenges readers to confront the complexities of caste and gender dynamics, urging a reevaluation of entrenched norms and systemic injustices. This study underscores the novel's significance in portraying Dalit women as agents of resilience and change, contributing to broader discourses on identity, representation, and social justice in literature.

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