

LABOUR, CONVERSION AND THE REMAKING OF CASTE IN G. KALYANA RAO'S *UNTOUCHABLE SPRING*

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Abstract

G. Kalyana Rao's Telugu novel Antarani Vasantam (2000), translated into English as Untouchable Spring (2010), follows a Mala and Madiga family across five generations, from the famine of the late 1870s to the revolutionary movements of the late twentieth century. For all its ambition, the novel has drawn little sustained criticism in English. This article reads it as a narrative of successive exits from untouchability, each of which the novel tries out and finds wanting: wage labour on the colonial famine works, Christian conversion, and radical politics. Drawing on B. R. Ambedkar's account of caste as a division of labourers, on his historical counter-narrative of the origins of untouchability, and on the history of the Telugu mass conversions, the article argues that Rao locates the endurance of caste less in surviving belief than in the way hierarchy re-forms inside each new institution the community enters. It further argues that the novel's oral and multigenerational form, assembled from song, remembered speech and a closing letter, works as an archive of these attempts rather than as a record of their defeat. A final section considers the gendered silence that the novel names in its own closing pages.

Keywords: G. Kalyana Rao; *Untouchable Spring*; Telugu Dalit literature; conversion; caste and class; B. R. Ambedkar; famine

Introduction

Rao's preface to *Untouchable Spring* runs to six short lines: "This Spring was forbidden then. / Now, too, forbidden. / The caste of birth forbidden. / The chosen struggle forbidden." A dedication precedes it. Rao offers the book to his mother and father and to Shyam, Mahesh, Murali and Lakshmirajam, whom he names as martyrs. Of the first three he notes that the police seized them in Bangalore late on 1 December 1999 and that they were then killed; the fourth, a Dalit, was shot by the police and "dressed . . . in olive green" so that his death could be presented as an armed encounter. These pages are easily passed over, and to my knowledge no English-language commentary on the novel has made anything of them. They nonetheless announce with unusual economy the problem the book sets itself. The preface joins two prohibitions that much Indian political thought has preferred to keep apart, the one attached to birth and the one attached to a chosen politics, and it insists that neither belongs only to the past. The dedication places the novel within a particular formation of the left in Andhra Pradesh, and Rao has long been a prominent figure in the Revolutionary Writers' Association, Virasam. Yet the novel that follows is, page for page, among the most searching accounts in Indian fiction of why the categories of that left could not by themselves explain what happened to Malas and Madigas.

The tension belongs to its moment. *Antarani Vasantam* appeared in 2000, at the end of the decade that remade Dalit politics in the Telugu country. The killing of Madigas at Karamchedu in July 1985 and of Malas at Tsundur in August 1991 produced, in the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha, an organisation that argued in explicitly Ambedkarite terms that the violence had been directed at Dalits as Dalits, by landlords who acted as a caste before they acted as a class (Berg; Srinivasulu). Within a few years the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi, known everywhere as the Madiga Dandora, had divided the newly consolidated category along the Mala–Madiga line by demanding that Scheduled Caste reservations be subcategorised (Gundimeda). A novel written in these years about a family that is part Mala and part Madiga, that converts to Christianity and later passes into the revolutionary movement, could not avoid the questions this history posed: whether caste could be absorbed into class, whether religion offered a way out, and whether the oppressed could be counted on to recognise one another.

Rao answers these questions not by argument but by sequence. Across five generations his family attempts three exits from the condition it inherits. It seeks wage labour on the colonial relief works during the famine; it converts; and in its later generations it enters the radical movement. Each exit is narrated with sympathy, and each fails in a particular way, because in each case hierarchy reconstitutes itself among the people the family joins. The argument of this article is that the novel's understanding of caste is in this respect close to B. R. Ambedkar's. Caste appears in it not mainly as a body of beliefs that education or conversion might dispel but as a structure that distributes labour, food, contact and protection, and that therefore reappears wherever those things are distributed. I also argue that Rao's form, with its oral cadences, its five generations and its refusal to close, is what makes this understanding narratable. A single life can show suffering; only a lineage can show a structure outliving its own reforms.

The point needs making because the novel's place in criticism remains marginal. Recent work on the formal life of Dalit writing, notably Toral Jatin Gajjarawala's study of Dalit realism and the essays gathered in *Dalit Text*, has concentrated largely on Hindi, Marathi and Tamil material, and Telugu fiction has been slower to enter the Anglophone conversation (Gajjarawala; Misrahi-Barak et al.). The article proceeds through the novel roughly in order. It begins with the origin myth that opens the book and with the figure of the singer who "knew no alphabet"; turns to the famine and the relief works on the Buckingham Canal; considers conversion as a politics of touch and the Church's subsequent absorption of caste; and ends with the passage into revolutionary politics and with the letter that closes the novel, including the silence the novel itself confesses. Quotations follow the translation by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar.¹

"How's the Concocted Story?": Myth, Laughter and the Archive of Song

The novel's frame is a widow's memory. Ruth, a former nurse who has become a writer, lives alone now that her husband Reuben, a pastor who served a hospital, has died, and in front of her, "on the half-broken high wall, appears the painting of Jesus on the Cross" (Rao 1). What the reader hears is Reuben's account of his family, given to Ruth across a long succession of nights and given again by her now; she calls him "my beautiful untouchable man" (2), and she insists that

her memory “is not past. She says it is an untouchable spring” (5). The image of the title is thus given first to remembering. What the preface calls forbidden returns here as something that keeps welling up, and the structure of the novel, in which the past is never concluded but repeatedly re-entered, follows from that figure.

Reuben begins with an origin myth, and the choice is deliberate. In it Chennaiah, a cowherd, wants to drink the milk of Kamadhenu, the cow of the gods; after her death Jambavanta puts the whole carcass in the pot instead of the half allowed him, and Chennaiah returns to the pot a morsel that has dropped on the ground. Siva curses both to live in the Kaliyuga “eating the meat of dead cows and sweeping the bazaars”: “Jambavanta’s children become madigas. Chennaiah’s children become malas” (Rao 4). Reuben then asks, smiling, “How’s the concocted story?” and goes on: “The story of my birth and your birth. Where did we come from? From a curse. From the wrath of the gods. From the piece of meat that fell out. Why is it so?” (4). Only later does Ruth understand that his laughter was “a rejection of and ridicule for that story” and “a condemnation of his birth that was so cruelly painted” (5).

It is tempting to read the scene as a simple debunking. What deserves attention is the content of what is debunked. The myth explains untouchability through a fault concerning the flesh of a dead cow, and it assigns to the two castes, as their punishment, the eating of carrion and the cleaning of public space. A caste society’s own account of its lowest rank, in other words, binds that rank to a particular diet and a particular labour, and presents both as the consequence of guilt. Ambedkar, writing half a century before Rao, had set out to replace accounts of exactly this kind with a historical one. In *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* he argued that untouchability attached to communities that had lived outside the settled village and had continued to eat beef after the dominant groups abandoned it, so that a dietary practice was turned, over centuries, into a mark of permanent pollution (Ambedkar, *Untouchables*). Whatever the merits of that hypothesis as history, its structure is instructive. Where the myth speaks of a curse, Ambedkar speaks of a process; where the myth makes the diet a punishment, Ambedkar makes it the arbitrary sign on which a hierarchy fastened. Reuben’s laughter performs the same reversal in the idiom of the household. It does not refute the myth with evidence. It withdraws the myth’s authority, and the novel will later return to the very sign the myth fixes, the meat of dead cattle, as the place where its characters first try to turn that withdrawal into practice.

The other presiding figure of these pages is Yellanna, Reuben’s grandfather, who sang and danced in Yennela Dinni and who “did not write songs. He knew no alphabet to write them in” (Rao 5). Nothing in the sentence mourns illiteracy. What it sets down is the condition under which Dalit cultural production has existed in the region: skilled, admired, often indispensable to the ritual and festive life of the village, and unrecorded, and therefore exposed to the forgetting of any history that trusts only documents. It is suggestive that Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana gave the first volume of their two-volume anthology of new Dalit writing from South India the title *No Alphabet in Sight*; the phrase names the same exclusion from the written record that Yellanna’s songs answer, and the second volume gathers the Telugu and Kannada writing of the decades in which Rao was working (Satyanarayana and Tharu; Tharu and Satyanarayana). Rao’s novel is in

part an attempt to give those songs a durable form without turning them into something else. The songs are set into the narrative rather than paraphrased by it, and the narration itself takes on their properties: phrases repeated across pages, short and often verbless sentences, a habit of returning to an event from a new angle rather than moving beyond it. The book follows the shape of its sources, since a people kept from writing stores its past in what it performs and in the remembering of those performances.

“Labour Too Had Untouchability”: Famine and the Relief Works

The first exit the family attempts is the most material. In the famine of the late 1870s, which Mike Davis has placed among the great subsistence catastrophes of the colonial world, Sivaiah, Yellanna's son, sets out from Yennela Dinni with Sasirekha, his wife (Davis). Along the way the couple fall in with Jinkodu, a boy who has watched his whole family perish: “Six sisters. They became one with the dust in front of my eyes. I'm a madiga from Bayyaram. I'm the only one left” (Rao 136). Jinkodu has been “adept at stealing food” since childhood (137), and he leads Sivaiah at night into a village where, in one house, a plate of half-eaten food lies beside a dead man. An old woman in the dark explains, “My husband . . . died without eating all of it,” and Jinkodu laughs: “Great man. He left this for us and died” (137–38). Rao does not soften the scene, and the laughter is of a piece with Reuben's laughter at the myth. It belongs to people who have no further use for the solemnities others attach to their condition. Famine strips social relations down to the question of who eats, and the novel's interest in the following pages is whether, stripped in this way, caste survives.

It does. Crowds of the starving are converging on the Buckingham Canal, where the government has opened relief work. When Sivaiah reaches the site and gives his name and origin, “I'm a mala from Yennela Dinni,” the man in charge shouts, “This son of a mala wants a job here, I believe,” and the other labourers drive him and Sasirekha off with mud and crowbars (Rao 140–41). The narrator's comment is among the central sentences of the book:

Even those coolies who threw stones at them had walked miles for livelihood. . . .
Just ordinary coolies. But hunger too had untouchability. Labour too had untouchability. (142)

Famine relief works were, in principle, a wage relation indifferent to birth: the state wanted earth moved and paid by the measure of it. The canal therefore tests a proposition shared by liberal and Marxist modernisers alike, that the market and the wage would dissolve the ascriptive order. What Sivaiah meets is not indifference but the old order re-formed among people who are themselves destitute. Ambedkar's formulation in *Annihilation of Caste* is apt in an almost literal sense: the caste system “is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” (Ambedkar, *Annihilation*, par. 4.1). The coolies who stone the Mala couple have nothing left but their place in a graded order, and the presence of someone beneath them is what makes their own want bearable. Shared hunger, far from producing solidarity, sharpens the defence of the one possession hunger has not taken.

Rao gives this recognition to the narrator in the plainest register available, and then widens the frame. Sivaiah and Sasirekha are “the inheritors of generations of untouchable lives” (Rao 143), and a roll-call follows of the names given to such people in region after region of the subcontinent, “In Tamil country, pariahs. / In Kannada country, hooleelu. / In Maharashtra, mangs, mahars, bhangis and chamars. / Among Telugus, malas and madigas,” before closing with a charge: “Here Vedas, religion, Manu, patience and integration are synonyms for treachery and deception” (144). The last word in that list deserves attention. “Integration” is not a scriptural term. It belongs to the vocabulary of twentieth-century reform and nationalism, in which the absorption of the untouchable into a reformed Hindu or national whole was offered as the answer to untouchability. By setting it beside Manu, Rao suggests that the modern promise of inclusion can do the work of the ancient sanction of exclusion, since both ask the excluded to be patient.

The rescue that follows confirms the point. When a preacher called Martin comes upon the pair, nearly dead, he explains that caste labourers refuse to dig alongside Malas and Madigas, and that the Baptist Mission has therefore accepted a separate length of the canal near Ongole, four miles of it, to be dug by them alone. The narrator's summary is lapidary: “Untouchable people. Untouchable labour. A specific place for that work. An expanse of four miles” (Rao 147). Here the novel stays very close to the documented history of the region. During the famine the American Baptist missionary John E. Clough took on a section of the canal works near Ongole in order to employ the starving, and in the summer of 1878 nearly nine thousand Madigas were baptised in and around Ongole within six weeks (Downs).² Rao's fiction does not contest this history so much as supply its interior. Where the mission's records count converts in thousands, the novel follows particular men and women, each deciding at the very limit of endurance. It also registers something the mission records tend to pass over, namely that the relief which saved Sivaiah's life was organised on the same principle of separation that had nearly ended it. The four miles are a refuge and a reservation at once.

Written in the 1990s, these chapters carry an unmistakable contemporary charge. The Dalit Mahasabha had broken with the Marxist-Leninist groups after Karamchedu on precisely the question the canal stages, whether the exploitation of agricultural labour could be understood without caste (Srinivasulu; Berg). Rao, writing from within the revolutionary left, places the Ambedkarite answer at the founding moment of his family's history. He does not repudiate class. The canal is a scene of wage labour, colonial capital and famine economics, and the novel never forgets it. What he will not grant is that common exploitation produces mutual recognition, and the rest of the book is built on that refusal.

“Can Touch Everyone?”: Conversion as a Politics of Contact

The second exit begins at a table. Before they eat in Martin's house, Saramma, his wife, says a prayer, and the couple hear the name “Jehovah” “for the first time” (Rao 149). Sivaiah finds “the new place and the new practice rather irksome” (150), and Rao makes sure that nothing resembling a doctrinal awakening takes place. What the couple receive is food they have not had to steal and speech addressed to them as persons. Martin, citing the Gospel, has already supplied

the theology: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests. But the son of man hath not where to lay his head" (145). The narrator glosses it in social terms: "Who are the sons of man who do not find place to rest? Poor people. Specifically untouchables among poor people. Sivaiahs and Sasirekhas" (146). The novel locates the beginning of conversion at the very point where caste had worked most cruelly in the preceding chapters, the distribution of food, and it allows the meaning of the faith to be supplied by the circumstances of those who receive it.

Martin's own history explains why conversion mattered so much to him. As Chinnodu, a Madiga youth of Kanigiri, he had once stayed seated when the younger kapu, a landlord, walked into the madigapalli. The rest of the settlement rose and joined their palms; one old man, too frail to stand unaided, begged his grandson, "Lift me up, the kapu's come" (Rao 157). For his refusal Chinnodu was kicked until his bones broke and left bound beneath an upturned cot weighted with a log, while "Everyone was watching. No one came forward" (158). The scene concerns posture, and posture is where caste is most continuously performed. The violence that answers Chinnodu is punitive and instructive at once: it punishes one man for remaining seated, and it teaches a whole settlement what remaining seated costs.

The scene of touch that follows should be read against this one. Years later a white missionary clasps Chinnodu's hand and lays an arm across his shoulder, and the narration stops to consider what the gesture says: "He said his body was not untouchable. He did not say it in words. He said it with his touch" (Rao 159). At his baptism Chinnodu asks a question, and Rao reports the exchange with deliberate care:

The white man understood Telugu. He heard Chinnodu's words. He heard the deep anguish of his voice. But he did not give him a straightforward reply. "For Christ, nobody is untouchable." He only said those words. Chinnodu heard them. The answer was not straightforward. Was not clear. He wanted to hear those words again. (159)

The question, as the narrator gives it, is "Now, is this body like a brahmin's? Like a reddy's body? Can touch everything? Can touch everyone?" (159). What Chinnodu asks is not only whether he may now be touched. He asks whether he may touch, whether his body has acquired the capacity that the bodies of brahmins and reddy's already possess, to reach out without contaminating. Sundar Sarukkai, writing on the phenomenology of untouchability, argues that the practice cannot be understood through the vocabulary of purity and pollution alone, because touch is reciprocal, and that the person who practises untouchability also curtails his own capacity to engage the world through the senses (Sarukkai). Chinnodu's question approaches the same reciprocity from the other side. Untouchability has been, for him, the withdrawal of an active power, and conversion attracts him because it promises to give that power back.

The answer he receives is theological and universal, and it does not quite meet the question. "For Christ, nobody is untouchable" is true at the level from which the missionary speaks and silent at the level of the village, where it will be tested. The narrator notes that the reply "was not straightforward," and the detail that matters most is that Chinnodu nonetheless "wanted to hear those words again." The wish for repetition is the wish of the whole novel, which is made of words heard again: the myth retold, the songs sung once more, Reuben's stories narrated afresh by Ruth.

Conversion, on this reading, is not the moment at which an answer is received. It is the moment at which a sentence becomes available to be repeated against the evidence.

Rao is equally exact about motive. When Sivaiah is renamed Simon, Martin tells him of Simon of Cyrene, compelled to carry the cross beside Christ, and the narrator adds, "In truth, even if the Sivaiahs did not convert into Simons, when did they not bear the Cross?" (Rao 165). The novel then states the reasons for conversion without embarrassment: "Martins and Sivaiahs believed in Christ to get rid of untouchability. They believed in him to appease their hunger. More than anything else they believed in Christ to save themselves from being hunted by men" (166). Historians of the mass movements in the Telugu and Tamil regions have long resisted the old opposition between sincere conversion and "rice Christianity," showing that converts used the missions to pursue goods the missions had not necessarily set out to offer, among them land, schooling, legal standing and release from bonded labour (Webster; Clarke). Rupa Viswanath has shown, for the Tamil country, how far colonial and missionary discussion of the "Pariah problem" was shaped by the reluctance of officials and many missionaries to treat the condition of the labouring castes as a matter of political economy rather than of religion (Viswanath). Rao's converts suffer from no such reluctance. They have joined a religion in order to change their social position, and they will judge the religion by whether it does.

"Christ Became Untouchable Here": The Church and the Return of Caste

Martin "had become a Christian to get away from untouchability. But Christ became untouchable here" (Rao 160). The new faith does not lift the convert out of the order of contact but is drawn down into it, so that in the eyes of the village the god himself acquires the convert's caste.

The decisive test returns to the sign the opening myth had fixed. Martin urges the Madigas of one village to give up carrion, and when their elder objects that dead cattle belong to the caste by right, Martin answers with an aphorism: "The fields by the Krishna river were the right of the kmmas. The fields by the Penna river were the right of the reddy's. But there and here too, as for the dead cattle, they were the right of the madigas" (Rao 161). The joke exposes the grammar of "right" in a caste economy, in which the dominant castes are entitled to land and the lowest to what the owners of land discard. The dominant castes grasp at once what is at stake, and one of them puts it exactly: "Today he'll say he won't eat it. Tomorrow he'll say he won't remove it" (161). The refusal of a food is read, correctly, as the first step towards the refusal of a labour, since the customary claim to carrion is bound up with the duty of removing dead animals from the village. What Ambedkar had identified as the historical sign of untouchability becomes here the point at which its present economy can be interrupted.

The punishment that follows is a ceremony of reinscription. Sinenkadu, a Madiga who has converted, puts the carcass of a bullock into the ground rather than eat it. He is beaten by the Choudharies and herded back to the spot where he buried it, and China Choudhary screams at him, "Eat the one you buried, you wretched bastard" (Rao 163). Sinenkadu digs out the meat, smeared with earth, and carries it home to eat. The violence does not punish a crime, since no law has been

broken. It restores a classification by forcing the body back into the practice through which the classification is recognised. Martin draws the conclusion: "To go about with dignity was not such a small matter. Eating or not eating too was not a small matter" (163). The narrator gives the forces ranged against men like Sinenkadu a memorable figure: "Cruel beasts with two iron legs. One leg was religion. The other leg was caste" (163).

The Church does not stand outside this arrangement. Attending a church gathering in Nellore, Simon notices converts of an unfamiliar sort: "Strange. John Paul Reddys, Immanuel Sastrys, Joshua Choudharys sprung up" (Rao 166). Nowhere does the novel show more briefly than in these hybrid names that conversion leaves caste intact for those able to keep it. A Madiga who converts is expected to put away his old name; a Reddy who converts carries his caste into the new faith as a surname. One of them, Immanuel Sastry, has married into the household of the karanam of Yennela Dinni, the very family under which Simon's people had suffered, and Simon "was unable to imagine both the crucifier and the crucified under the same roof" (167). Later Sastry, practising as a lawyer, is approached by Martin on behalf of poor Christians caught in a land dispute; their opponents are upper-caste farmers who have also been baptised, and Sastry refuses with a universalism that serves as an alibi: "Once one says he's a Christian, he's a Christian" (173). The equality of believers is invoked precisely in order to forbid any naming of the inequality between them. Martin and Simon's verdict is unadorned: "Though the religion has changed, the caste hasn't worn off" (174).

Persecution, meanwhile, travels in one direction only. "There was no news of attacks on choudhary Christians of the Krishna district. No news of attacks on reddy Christians of Nellore district. . . . All that happened affected only the malas and madigas, the untouchable Christians" (Rao 168). A list of outrages follows. Converts are imprisoned and tortured at Markapuram; at Kanigiri a Bible is set alight; in one village ten converts are thrown into the tank so that their "Christian touch" may be washed off, and are daubed with blood from a buffalo offered to Poleramma; a young Madiga is killed because he walked down the village street in slippers, holding a Bible (169). The details show that the dominant castes are not punishing apostasy. No character in the book disputes what the missionaries teach, and the upper-caste converts are left in peace. What is punished is insubordination expressed through the new faith: the refusal of carrion, the refusal to rise, the wearing of slippers, the carrying of a book.

Ambedkar, who weighed Christianity as a path for the untouchables and finally turned away from it, argued that conversion could alter the convert's standing only if it were matched by an altered outlook among the dominant castes as well as in the convert's own mind, and that where only the second occurred, the convert's position remained substantially what it had been (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 5: 470). Rao's novel dramatises this argument without citing it. Its converts change; the village does not; and the Church, admitting the dominant castes on their own terms, becomes one more institution in which caste positions are held. Dalit theology would later make a comparable diagnosis from inside the churches, arguing that Indian Christian thought had largely been written from a Brahmanical standpoint and needed to be rewritten from the experience of Dalit converts (Nirmal; Clarke). Martin arrives at a version of that theology within

the novel. "We didn't join the religion to keep silent. We didn't get baptised to squirm in our bodies," he says (Rao 170), and he reads the passage from Isaiah that Christ read at Nazareth as a charter for the crushed: "He sent me to release the crushed people. If that were not so, why should I speak? If that were not so, why should I become close to Christ?" (170). He adds, "If raising the head is a crime, I'll commit that crime" (171).

Martin's thinking travels, too, from the body towards the soil. Having won for impoverished Christians permission to farm a tract of barren land, he remarks to Simon, "It's necessary to have land to raise your head and walk about," and then, more revealingly, "I thought it'd be enough if the body was not untouchable. It brings along the need to have a little bit of food for that body" (Rao 174). The conversion narrative here reaches the limit the canal had already shown: dignity of contact cannot be secured without the material conditions that caste also distributes. On Christmas Eve, as he walks home with Simon, Martin is set upon and stabbed to death; his killers beat Simon and make him shoulder the corpse and bear it back to the settlement. Rao draws the parallel openly, "That Simon bore Christ's Cross. This Simon was carrying the corpse of a Christian preacher," and ends the episode in three words: "Blood. Untouchable blood" (175). The figure of Simon of Cyrene, offered to Sivaiah at his renaming as a consolation, returns as a literal burden.

From the Church to the Movement

The later generations carry the family into the twentieth century and into new institutions, and Rao is careful to show that caste follows them in. Simon's son Reuben, a pastor, "hated the upper-caste converts all the more. 'He didn't come for Christ. He came to dominate,' he would say" (Rao 202). The appointment of a Reddy to head a mission school draws his protest: "Couldn't they find a mala Christian? Couldn't they locate a madiga Christian? They needed a reddy Christian!" (202). Ramanujam, Reuben's friend, goes over to the Communists and afterwards to the Srikakulam uprising, and Immanuel, Reuben's son, goes after him (231). At Avalapadu the police raze the malapalli for having harboured Communists, acting on a tip from a Choudhary landlord (222).

That last episode is easily read as a plain scene of state repression, but its structure repeats the canal. The revolutionary movement promises a solidarity that would cut across caste, and the violence it provokes is nonetheless delivered to the Dalit settlement, on the word of a landlord whose standing in the village is a caste standing. Rao's loyalty to the movement is evident in the dedication and in the ending, where the surviving characters are inside it. His novel does not, however, present the movement as the exit that finally works. It presents it as the latest place to which the family has carried its inheritance of refusal, and it counts the cost: Martin is killed, Reuben's ministry is compromised by the church he serves, and the movement takes from Ruth her son and her grandson. The sequence from song to conversion to land to revolution is one of continuity rather than of progress. Every generation receives the previous one's refusal and looks for a fresh setting in which to sustain it, and every setting turns out to house the old hierarchy in altered dress.

The novel does not so much end as hand itself on. Once Reuben has died, Ruth sends a letter to Jessie, her grandson, now living in hiding with the movement, in which she calls him her “ponnangi pitta” and tells him, “You’re dreaming of the new man. You’re dreaming of a new world” (Rao 263). For her own grave she wants one sentence only: “Her memory rested in the on-going war” (264). Then comes a “Final Word” in which the narrator admits that the book is unfinished: Ruth was unable to tell the stories of Immanuel, Ruby and Jessie, and Mary Suvarta, who was married to Immanuel, “remained almost silent in the novel,” although “She dedicated her husband and child to the movement” (264).

The novel opened with Ruth remembering and closes with Ruth writing, so that the reader is placed in the position of the grandson who receives the account. Nothing is resolved. The violence goes on, the Church is still compromised, and the movement has by now claimed the family’s men. What the ending claims is only that the account has been passed on intact, and for people whose past has been repeatedly struck from the record, handing it on is the one victory a novel is able to win. Ruth’s epitaph makes memory a combatant rather than a consolation, and so completes the image with which the novel began: the untouchable spring is a memory that refuses to become the past.

The “Final Word” also does something rarer. It names, in the novel’s own voice, a silence at the centre of its counter-history. The line of descent the book follows is mostly a male one, running through Jessie, Immanuel, Reuben and Sivaiah back to Yellanna (Rao 188), while the women who make that inheritance possible, Sasirekha walking out of the famine beside Sivaiah, Saramma at the table, Mary Suvarta giving a husband and a son to the movement, are scarcely individuated. Sharmila Rege’s insistence that Dalit women’s testimonies call for a reading that does not treat gender as secondary to caste is pertinent here (Rege), and the novel stands in an unusual relation to it. Its narrator is a woman and its memory is hers; its subject, nonetheless, is a lineage of fathers and sons. The “Final Word” acknowledges this without repairing it. The acknowledgement is worth more than an evasion would have been, since it records the limit as a fact about the history the novel had to work with. It remains an acknowledgement rather than a correction, and criticism should say so.

Conclusion

Untouchable Spring is sometimes described as a chronicle of Dalit suffering, and the description misses what is most distinctive about it. The novel is a history of attempted exits: from the village into wage labour, from Hinduism into the Church, from the Church into the movement. It treats each attempt with respect and narrates each failure with precision, and the failures share a structure. Caste does not survive because the dominant castes, or the converts themselves, cling to old beliefs. It survives because every institution the family enters must distribute something, whether work, food, contact, land or protection, and caste re-forms around the distribution. Famished coolies defend the one rank left to them; a mission saves lives by segregating labour; a church admits the dominant castes on their own terms and leaves its Dalit members to bear the persecution; a revolutionary movement draws the violence of the state onto the malapalli. This is

Ambedkar's argument rendered as narrative, and it is the more striking for having been written from within a political tradition that had long resisted it.

Rao's form is not incidental to this argument. A hierarchy that outlives its reforms can be shown only by a story long enough to span five generations, and an unwritten past can be held only by a story built out of song and remembered speech. The closing letter turns the novel's refusal of resolution into a positive act: nothing has been settled, but the account has reached the next reader whole. The questions the novel poses have lost none of their urgency in the Telugu states, where the Mala–Madiga division that shadows its pages has remained central to Dalit politics, most recently in the debates that followed the Supreme Court's 2024 judgement permitting the subclassification of Scheduled Castes.³ A novel that declines to treat the Dalit community as a unity, and declines equally to let its divisions become a reason for despair, has something to say to those debates.

The novel's own silence, finally, marks the direction in which its project would have to be carried forward. Mary Suvarta "remained almost silent" (Rao 264), and the novel says so. A criticism that takes *Untouchable Spring* as seriously as it deserves will read it as one of the most ambitious Indian novels of its generation and will also take the "Final Word" at its word. The story has not been completed, and the part still to be told belongs to the women who carried it.

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