

Ritual, Power, and Caste Violence: A Critical Analysis of Aravind Malagatti's *Karya*

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Abstract:

The present paper takes a critical look at the short story *Karya* as written by Aravind Malagatti as an objection to the ritualization of caste violence in the modern Indian society. Getting beyond the visuals of blatant physical oppression, the storyline reveals the working of caste force in terms of the daily rituals that reinforce inequality and make Dalits obedient to the labels of social responsibility. Violence is placed in the story not as a special event but as a social norm that is supported by the collective agreement, moral coercion, and cultural authority.

The analysis of close texts allows the study to develop an insight into how *Karya* questions the contact of ritual, labour, and authority, and to establish the psychological and ethical aspects of caste oppression. The realist narrative approach of Malagatti predicts the lived sense of Dalit subjects, the way of embarrassment and pressure assimilated through the repetitive social practices. It is the resistance of the main character, a delicate but effective one, that indicates a break in the caste hierarchy and disputes the perceived inalienability of the ritual obedience.

The paper contextualizes *Karya* in the overall pathway of Dalit literature that recontextualizes violence in terms of being structural and daily as opposed to episodic. It states that the work by Malagatti is an unsettling contribution to the dominant narratives of social harmony because it reveals the moral economy, which perpetuates caste hierarchies. In projecting the refusal as an ethical position in advance, *Karya* helps to add to the modern Dalit politics of dignity, agency, and the reconstruction of social relations. The paper therefore presents the story as an important literary intervention that will force a reconsideration of caste as an ongoing and disputed reality in the contemporary India.

Keywords: *Karya*; Kannada Dalit literature; caste and ritual; structural caste violence; Ambedkarite critique; Dalit resistance; religious hegemony

Introduction:

Aravind Malagatti is a poet, fiction writer, critic and cultural activist with an important place in the Kannada Dalit literature. Having published over fifty works in poetry, fiction and critical prose, the literary career of Malagatti indicates his long-term interest in the issues of caste, authority, and social justice. His work has been officially recognised with various awards such as the Ambedkar Fellowship Award of the Government of Karnataka. His autobiographical book *Government Brahmana*, which is popularly considered to be the first Dalit autobiography in the Kannada language, won the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award and is considered a landmark work in the expression of Dalit identity and resistance. Dalit literature in India is a creation of the experiences of the communities which were historically pushed to the periphery through the art of untouchability. Instead of being portrayed as mere victims of oppression, this literature anticipates resistance, resilience and dignity. Specifically, Kannada Dalit literature has been instrumental in reforming the cultural discourse through challenging the mainstream literature that was either silent or sanitizing about the existence of caste. Such authors as Malagatti are a part of this tradition as they bring out the contradictions that are inherent in the democratic and social ideas of India.

In spite of the constitutional provisions on equality, caste still continues to organize the daily social relations in India. The motto of unity in diversity is often repeated, which is just another dream because social divisions by caste, religion, and ritual continue to determine the access to power and dignity. These divisions are not only social but epistemic which are supported by ignorance, blind following of tradition and moral power of religious practices. In this regard, the controversies concerning caste especially those relating to the opposing views of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi are highly pertinent in decades after gaining independence. Although the concept of caste is often ignored as an obsolete phenomenon, its role in the modern social, cultural, and religious life cannot be overlooked. Published in Kannada in 1988 and translated into English by Susheela Punitha in 2021, Malagatti is a literary intervention into this perpetual reality in a stark way. The text reveals the working of caste through ritualised practices that are seemingly normal but have far-reaching consequences on the dignity of Dalits through its realist storyline. The work does not deal with caste as an abstract social issue but rather introduces it as a lived situation that defines the experience between birth and death. *Karya* by focusing on a religious ritual shows how hierarchy, exclusion and symbolic violence are institutionalized by Hindu religious structures at the time that should have been a moment of communal solidarity.

Malagatti bases his writing on the tradition of the Ambedkarites, who consider caste as a regime of graded inequality that is perpetuated by religious sanctions and cultural agreement. He uses the techniques of irony, satire, and counter-narrative to work out hegemonic representations which have made caste oppression normalised. *Karya* also complicates the discussion by depicting there to be internal hierarchies between marginalised castes, which in turn tend to make the members of the Dalit castes resist collectively. The

fractures obviously support the dominance of the upper caste by repeating a logic of divide and rule even among the oppressed.

The critical analysis of the work by Malagatti has indicated the constraints of legal and constitutional remedies against caste-based humiliation. Research as S. Johny analysis of Government Brahmana has identified that caste oppression often changes with new socio-legal structures instead of vanishing. These readings highlight the significance of literary books such as *Karya*, which reveal the moral and psychological aspects of caste violence that cannot be noticed in terms of law. Through foregrounding of ritual as a source of power, *Karya* becomes an interesting commentary of the institutions that perpetuate caste inequality in modern India. *Review of Literature and Contemporary Context*

The most significant critique presented of the writings of Aravind Malagatti has centered on his autobiography Government Brahmana, which takes a central place in the Kannada Dalit literature. A contribution to the literature on the topic is the article written by Anand Kattimani in the Research Journal of English (Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2024), which analyzes the text as a revolutionary literary intervention voicing Dalit lived experience without obeying caste hierarchies. Kattimani places the autobiography into a historical and a contemporary context showing how the story of Malagatti reflects both the socio-cultural context of a particular time and also shows varying patterns of Dalit assertion. The study presents a valuable critical prism of possible insight into the role of autobiographical writing in Dalit literary traditions as a witness and a form of resistance.

Religion and ritual become the main tools of maintaining caste hierarchies throughout the works of Malagatti. Dr. The article, "Interrogating Rigidity of Caste and Religion: A Study of Aravind Malagatti Government Brahmana by Prabuddh Ananda, Literary Herald (Vol. 10, Issue 1, June 2024) critically discusses the inability of religious institutions to be flexible and accommodate social exclusion. Ananda suggests that the practices of Hindu religion have the predilection to support the caste divisions by entrenching the concept of impurity and purity in day to day activities. This discussion is of specific interest to the interpretation of *Karya* where ritual is a place where power is practiced and Dalit dignity is denied systematically.

The personal thoughts of Malagatti on caste, literature and social changes also add to the scholarly discourse. In a post published in Sage Journals (Vol. 88, Issue 3, 2021) in an interview conducted by Surya Simon, Malagatti expresses the ongoing usefulness of Dalit literature in questioning the concept of caste as an allegedly outdated social category. This interview highlights how literature and translation works to increase the Dalit voices across the regional borders as well as revealing gaps in the critical response to the ritual based caste violence. These considerations present a valuable conceptual context in which *Karya* is

intended to be analysed as a text which prefigures a form of ethical opposition to cultural structures of oppression.

Though literary scholarship provides critical analysis of the caste dynamics, modern day reports show how caste based violence continues even in the textual contents. The Hindu published an article on 23 September 2024 entitled U.P., Rajasthan, M.P. top in cases of atrocities on Dalits, which shows the shocking levels of prevalence of atrocities against Dalit communities despite the constitutional protection. It is recorded that the number of registered cases under atrocity laws is high, there are low conviction rates and delayed justice. This information highlights the weaknesses of the legal modification and the usefulness of the literary plots that cover both ethical and psychological aspects of caste subjugation.

The recent events that were reported in the national newspapers are also another indication of the way Hindu religious practices remain sites of exclusion. The reason given in an article by Ashis Senapati in the Times of India (9 November 2024) is a protest by the Scheduled Caste women in the Kendrapara district of Odisha over the refusal to carry out a temple ritual during the holy month of Kartik. The explanation that was provided by the officials of the temples, and that the offering made by Dalit women would be considered a ritual impurity, demonstrate the fact that religious practices are applied selectively to maintain caste superiority. These cases are symptomatic of the manipulation of ritual purity in order to restrict the involvement of the Dalits in the religious life of the community in general.

Similarly, a report by Mohd. Dilshad wrote in The Times of India (15 November 2024) about the disturbance of the cremation of a Dalit man in Muzaffarnagar, in which members of the dominant caste supposedly blocked the family's attempts to carry out last rites in a communal cremation ground. It is also noteworthy that the caste discrimination reaches even into the funeral ceremonies as the entry is denied with casteist threats. This life case is quite close enough to the story of *Karya* in which the integrity of Dalit bodies is denied by the use of ritual exclusion, which confirms the legacy between the lived reality and the literary one.

A second article that was published in The Indian Express (8 March 2025) about the refusal of Dalit families to enter a temple in the West Bengal village of Gidhagram also demonstrates the disconnect between the law and social life. The caste hierarchies are not only fought in constitutional spaces, but religious spaces also remain an area of contention whereby caste hierarchies are practiced and reinforced. These examples indicate some kind of structural violence where belief systems and rituals serve as means of social control.

These academic texts and the reports of the day combine to create a critical background of understanding of *Karya*. They prove that the discrimination based on caste

and especially with the help of religious practices is one of the constant aspects of Indian society. Placing the Malagatti story in a context of the contemporary socio-political reality, this work aims at highlighting the topicality of *Karya* as a work of literature, which reveals the perpetual interweaving of the rituals, power and caste violence in modern India.

Karya by Aravind Malagatti is a keen critique on the contribution of religion and ritual in maintaining and sanctioning caste hierarchies. Malagatti, in the interview carried in the Indian Cultural Forum on 12 April 2021, looks back at Hindu practices not as practices that maintain a robust spiritual life but as processes that sustain caste identities and promote stratification. His words indicate that such practices work by discomposing the moral minds of the reader, making them feel uncomfortable instead of religious, and thus forcing them to have a critical interaction with tradition. These thoughts can shed light on the process by which ritual practices gain cultural power and normalize exclusion at the same time.

The same focus on ritual and death is reflected in the review of Deepa Bhasthi of *Karya*, which appeared on the online platform ArtReview 22 July 2021 and was called The Usefulness of Death: Aravind Malagatti's *Karya*. Death is made a complex social event in the way it is foregrounded in the review since it is deeply entrenched in caste relations. Although death is traditionally envisioned as a great equaliser, *Karya* defies this belief as the Dalit lives are demeaned even after death. The story shows that the Dalit body rather than being liberated on death is still controlled by the caste with ritual taboos and exclusions.

This contradiction is supported by the irony of the sentence usage of utility of death. Instead of providing liberation of social bonds, death in *Karya* is another place of enforcing power of caste. The refusal of the fundamental rite of passage, represented by a ban on ritual-fire and the treatment of the body, demonstrates that caste identity continues despite the fact of the end of life. In this regard, the text acts as the critique of a social order that is not ready to give up its control over the Dalit bodies, turning death into a spectacle of humiliation, instead of a collective experience of mourning.

Through the application of death as a narrative and moral tool, Malagatti offers the emptiness of the argument that caste fades away at the moment of complete human powerlessness. This is how *Karya* makes the readers face the disturbing fact that caste does not just rule life but also extends its reign in death exposing the extent to which ritualised discrimination is instilled in the social and religious structure in the Indian society.

Discussion

Caste in India is a system of inequality that is both perpetuated by social relations and ritual practices which purport to be religious. Aravind Malagatti predicts this caste and ritual mess in *Karya* to show how the Hindu ritual crafts order and silences opposition. The story focuses on funeral rituals of a Dalit muthaide, Bangaravva, and turns the period of collective grief into a place of humiliation, terror, and ritual force.

The novel begins with the funeral procession which is headed by Ghategara Mallappa carrying kullaggi which is the ritual fire that should not touch the ground in any way. And right behind him, with the kavala mora, or winnowing tray, of the remains of sacrifice food and ritual articles bearing on the dead, comes Fakirappa. These are objects that are holy through custom; which turn into a tool of physical and psychological violence. The strict ceremonial regulations put in place put even more emphasis on the symbolic purity than human weakness.

The incidental dropping of the kullaggi is one of the pivotal breaks of the story. The fire, which is a representation of the continuation of rituals and spiritual order, turns into a cause of collective panic on reaching the ground. Instead of recognizing the obvious pain under Mallappa who burns his palms trying to put out the fire, the community is obsessed with the perceived ritual contamination. The fact that Malagatti repeats his warnings that it should not fall to the floor, it is bad omen in case it fell to the floor is an indication of the obsessive moral watch over the Dalit bodies when carrying out the rituals. The question asked on the cover of the book- He dropped the sacred fire- it was wrong- but was he to be blamed- is a direct challenge to the reasoning of ritual guilt which is inflicted on the oppressed.

The voice, pain and agency of Mallappa are being made invisible in this ritual economy. His pain is placed in second place to the symbolic crime that has been committed against the customs of religion and this shows us a discriminating moral gaze that favors abstract ideas of purity more than human life. This silencing is echoed by the statement made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak when she says that the subaltern is deprived of speech in the dominant ideological paradigms. In practice, the subject of the subaltern is not only silenced but systematically eliminated by the traditions that purport moral parenthesis as Spivak tries to argue. The physical stamina of Mallappa and the emotional pain do not stand a chance of being perceived as significant to the ritual order in *Karya*, just as the annulment of the suffering of women to the patriarchal practice of religion like sati.

The same reasoning applies to the case of Fakirappa. Tradition dictates that he cannot put aside the kavala mora, not even momentarily. The warning—“Don’t sit. You will pay a fine as you will do it on account of--discipline of the ritual, shows the effect of threat and punishment. The misery of Fakirappa is exacerbated because the convoy stops but he is still unable to act because he is afraid to defy holy regulations. The internalisation of caste ideology has been indicated by his conviction that it will be tantamount to deception of Bangaravva, who is a person he holds in high esteem. The rite is not just an exterior form of coercion, it colonises his conscience.

Malagatti employs the silent endurance of Fakirappa to demonstrate how Hindu religious practices with their strong emphasis on caste hierarchies transform religion into a

control mechanism. The accident of the kullaggi falling which might have been otherwise treated as an accident is brought to a level of a moral crisis that has to be adjudged by the Panchas. This change of fortune into transgression highlights how rites are used in increasing the suffering instead of decreasing it.

These scenes show that caste violence is not spectacular, rather it is performed through everyday activities that seem to be sacrosanct. Malagatti makes oppression a part of the funeral rites, which is probably the most serious of human rites, indicating how much the caste dictates the life and even the death. The novel ends up calling the readers to face the moral vacuity of the rituals that uphold purity to the expense of human dignity to reveal the caste as a system maintained by silence, fear, and moral complicity.

The words of Fakirappa,--Kaaka, I am dying! His refusal to move even when the pain is too intense, -show how far ritual discipline has infiltrated his body and consciousness (*Karya*, 2021, pp. 51, 55). This is shown by his terror of being fined by the Panchas and by his insistence that he cannot cheat on Bangaravva, whom he treats with reverence, and by which he accepts ritual manda as satisfying his physical survival. Fakirappa is not a man who only lives by tradition, but he absorbs it as an ethical absolute. His affliction therefore becomes self-controlled displaying a kind of domination that does not happen through coercion.

This state is very similar to the idea of the docile body proposed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. To Foucault, when the bodies of individuals are transformed into serviceable, complying, and manageable subjects of disciplinary regimes as opposed to coercive ones, it becomes docile. It is just such a regime to which Fakirappa is subjected: he is turned into a ritual tool whose stability allows perpetuating the illusion of religious purity. His suffering does not matter since the ritual needs continuity, but not compassion. Malagatti reveals how Dalit bodies are disciplined by religious practices to be submissive objects and turned into functional objects in a caste-based ceremonial economy of Dalit bodies.

Malagatti continues this criticism by a caustic satire in a section he calls The Futile Throat of an Ice-corpse in which ascetics, especially Veerashaiva Jangamas are seen as agents who make a living on ritual addiction. These sadhus are depicted subdividing Dalit colonies as real estate, spiritual service as a marketplace and not a moral profession. The ironic voice reflects the hypocrisy of a religious order that alleges to be spiritual and prevents any type of caste mixing. Instead of providing liberation, ritual knowledge becomes a commodity whereby dominance is recreated. The satire of Malagatti destroys the ethical authority of such people and shows that religion is not a belief but rather a mechanism of discipline.

It is the religious orthodoxy that works in a similar fashion as the Panopticon described by Foucault whereby the surveillance is internalised and the discipline maintained even in the case where the visible power is not present. In *Karya*, there is no supervisor who has to impose obedience, the fear of sinning itself controls behaviour. The inability of Fakirappa to move, Mallappa to speak, and the fixation of the community on ritual purity depicts how the discipline of caste is maintained in any society by the active presence of moral discipline. Traditional gaze-much more so the panoptic eye-is more certain to get compliance by instilling surveillance into faith.

In addition to inter-caste oppression, *Karya* also shows the existence of intra-caste hierarchies that facilitate any romantic idea of uniting Dalits. This aspect echoes the arguments of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that social emancipation needs collective consciousness and organisation. Malagatti shows that it is the divisions within the Dalit communities themselves that are caused by the status of rituals and passed-on prejudice. The episode with the engagement between Akkavva being canceled reveals the ways of how caste logic is reproduced even among the marginalised. Although the Samagaras and Machegaras and other groups that occupy similar occupational roles and are socially vulnerable are united by ritual hierarchies, they are unable to overcome inherited differences.

This inability to organise is a more tragic failure: one should not just look at outward domination to understand the persistence of oppression but to understand internalised caste consciousness as well as Ambedkar had warned. Malagatti also describes this fragmentation, but in a subtle but strong way, displaying how solidarity is undermined by ritual prejudice, reinforcing marginalisation. *Karya* therefore introduces caste as a multi-tiered arrangement of domination by functioning as a trough of religion, discipline of rituals, surveillance, and internal division and it is evident that caste cannot be subjected by higher strata but supported by daily practices and beliefs.

Karya, by means of the torment of Fakirappa, the mockery of ascetic authority, the revelation of the struggle between caste, provides a scathing indictment of the orthodoxy of the Hindu rites as a means of normalising cruelty and pretending to it as a duty. The story of Malagatti makes readers face the extent of which the violence of caste is organized in the moral life of society, governing bodies, ideologies, and even in the moments of death and grieving.

The story also adds more depth to the issue of caste oppression by introducing a powerful-caste landlord Shantagowda whose enmity of Mallappa is determined by systemic caste bias and a personal feeling of insecurity. The resentment that Shantagowda experiences is not random; it is brought about by the fact that Mallappa is a successful wrestler publicly, something that upsets the symbolism of caste hierarchy. The triumph of Mallappa in a contest that was organized by state authorities and his consequent celebration of it by gaining

recognition over the masses is a moment when the Dalit excellence is on display, thus posing a threat to the delicate caste privilege. According to Malagatti, this is where the hatred of Shantagowda intensifies henceforth and shows how the domination of caste depends on the oppression of Dalit desire and not on economic domination.

Shantagowda is anxious not only in the social environments but also in the area of the body symbolism. Even his frenzy at Varaga Dasaratha, the father of Mallappa, who wears a moustache similar to his, reveals how caste is controlling even the most personal of identities. The moustache in this case is the signifier of male dignity and sociality- two of the qualities that were not traditionally granted to the Dalits. The claim of self-respect by Dasaratha expressing himself in appearance is, therefore, interpreted as transgression of the caste order. The fact that Shantagowda insisted that the moustache be shaved depicts how caste power attempts to discipline the bodies to be seen as subordinated.

But Malagatti makes this episode more complicated by showing the depth of contradictions in the very society of caste. At the time of the order, the Nayadara barber who is a member of a different marginalised caste declines to shave Dasaratha because of ritual hierarchy and physical pollution. Even though this rejection may seem as a protest against the power of the dominant caste, it also reveals the fact that intra-caste discrimination continues to exist. The fact that the barber proclaims Dasaratha to be of lower caste proves how the logic of purity and pollution in its replication splintering opportunities of collective solidarity replicates itself even within the oppressed groups.

This scene is a strong resonance of the classic argument of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his work *Annihilation of Caste* which communities caste is not merely division of labour, but a graduated hierarchy of labourers. The way Ambedkar insists that caste exists through religious sanction and ritual act is the very act of creation of the concrete representation of Karya, in which the daily rituals whether funeral or body rules are turned into machines of imposing inequality. The funeral rite in the core of the story, despite it being conducted among the Dalit woman, is still bound by Hindu ritual guidelines which replicate Brahminical standards, as opposed to human decency. Caste identity can not be avoided even in death.

The message of Ambedkar that social, political, and economic reform is impossible without destroying caste runs through the whole text. The moustache affair, as is the case with the funeral ceremony, demonstrates that caste is a system that exists concurrently as a system of coercion, internalization and mutual policing. Although the refusal of the barber suddenly destabilizes the dominant authority, it further reveals the extent of the penetration of the caste consciousness into the social relations on all levels.

The end of the novel is open and disconcerting and does not give a resolution. This narrative tool passes the blame on to the reader forcing one to reflect other than draw a conclusion. The vagueness highlights the hopelessness of the rituals, which pretends to have a sacred purpose but brings about suffering and death. In *Karya*, the grand funeral ceremonies meant to bring peace are actually a cause of new violence indicating that ritual orthodoxy does not work, quite the contrary, it serves to perpetrate violence. The unresolved climax, therefore, serves the role of an ethical provocation, by calling upon the readers to address the realities of Dalits as experienced, and challenge the ethical validity of the traditions that perpetuate caste inequality.

Conclusion

This paper has not only explored caste as a sociological organization but also as a lived and embodied reality that dictates all aspects of Dalit life. Aravind Malagatti, with *Karya*, displays the everyday violence of caste discrimination in real-life situations, relying on the literary narrative to disturb and challenge established social hierarchies. Instead of providing open protest, Malagatti upsets the moral and intellectual comfort of the reader by exposing the working of caste through ritual, belief and silence. The text implicitly confirms the idea that the only way to reform the caste relations meaningfully is to critically revisit the Hindu religious structure that justifies and supports graded inequality.

Karya is changing what is traditionally viewed as holy by preempting death and funeral rituals to become a location of violence and marginalization. It shows how physically exploiting the Dalits through the landowners of the dominant caste and mentally through religious superstition still affects the lives of the Dalits. It is not merely the account of the broken funeral, but a great damascrition of the timeless hold of the caste system over Indian society, in which even death is not worth being dignified. The disposal of the body of Bangaravva, who was left in the cremation ground to be contaminated with rituals reveals the emptiness and inhumanity that informed religious activities based on caste.

The inability of Malagatti to resolve some of the critical narratives: the death of Rudragowda, Varaga Dasaratha, and the refusal of the body of Bangaravva, can be seen as a political maneuver. These moments of openness are an indication of the widespreadness of Brahminical domination and systematic destruction of Dalit agency, even within the most intimate and sacred spaces. The text implies that, both life and death are still governed by the caste, which supports the claim made by Ambedkar that caste is a totalising system that is entrenched in the social, religious, and ethical realms.

Karya therefore finds an important niche in the Dalit literary discourse as it integrates Ambedkarite criticism of the caste hierarchy, Foucaultian analysis of power as a disposal of everyday practices and Spivakes concern about the silencing of the subaltern. It shows how caste is something that requires not dignity but submission, not equality but obedience. Finally, the document gives confirmation that opposition against caste oppression is constant

and historical in the past. The generations of Dalit writers have still been able to work out their personal sufferings into group criticism and question the morality of the traditions that justified exclusion. By so doing, *Karya* establishes again the literary importance of literature as an important venue of questioning, resistance, and moral accountability in a society which is highly stratified.

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