



# Construction of Self in Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*

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### Abstract

*The issues based on caste, gender, and religion have been imprinted upon the medium of art. The canvas of literature has many a time laid focus on the discrimination based on caste. This theme has been etched in different hues. The subject of being dominated, discriminated, and the stigma attached to it has been justified by the individual ideologies of Dalit and Non-Dalit writers. But in this prominent autobiographical work titled *Government Brahmana*, by Arvind Malagatti there is a different perspective is presented. Dalit autobiographies speak about the rampant practices of intolerance towards Dalits and have significantly impacted society. In a step ahead, Arvind Malagatti *Dalitarta* is the literature that has the flow of Dalit consciousness throughout. This autobiography *Government Brahmana* speaks about various sagas the writer witnessed in different stages of life.*

*In the beginning, he justifies the title *Government Brahmana* by considering the benefits given by the government to Dalits in comparison to the ideology of Brahmanism which was in practice from Sanatana Dharma. Later he draws the attention of readers by revealing how his name was misinterpreted in school and a variety of punishments imposed on him. He also writes about the ways in which the society marginalized the people belonging to his community in the name of untouchables. His writings not only interpret the chaos of marginalization but also reflect the consciousness of constructing his identity in tackling the hurdles. This apparently resulted in oppression and alienation after the country became sovereign. Apart from this, he has been able to contemplate his narrative style using his special dialect to withstand the interest of readers in the original text. It is good to know that the same has been achieved in the translational work by translators.*

**Keywords:** Hegemony, Alienation, Marginalisation, Untouchable, Consciousness and Ideology

Every country in the globe has its parameters of self-based habitual practices. It is categorized on grounds of food principles, culture, gender, religion, tradition, and economical backgrounds. Similarly, in a democratic country like India, certain things were categorized and glorified based on gender, religion, and particularly caste. The laymen have sustained the forceful implications of western policies, culture, and tradition as a part of colonialism to reclaim their existence on the soil. The aftermath of the freedom struggle led us to become self-governing. The nation succeeded to become free from British rule but the citizens didn't get their fundamental rights due to the policies and practices imposed by the upper-class people on the weaker section of the society. This resulted in the beliefs of certain groups of people to raise their voices as they were not liberated and were denied their freedom.

The word 'Dalit' means oppressed or broken. In Sanskrit it means downtrodden, suppressed, crushed, and broken into pieces. As per our mythological beliefs, the origin of the caste system can be found in the Vedas, which is said to be the scripture of the Aryans.

The Tenth Mandala of "Rig Veda", considered to be the oldest religious text in the world, contains the famous "Purushasukta" which explains the fourfold caste system and its inner sight. However, Dalits from the fifth varna were also called Panchamas and they remained outside the four-fold Indian caste system. In short, the earlier untouchables were called Dalits in modern days. Dalit is a word coined by Jyoti Rao Phule in the nineteenth century, witnessing the oppressed who had been termed as untouchables. Later terms like Ashprishya, Harijan, etc. were used to denote the set of untouchables.

Similarly, the domination portrayed upon Dalits by upper caste people in various circumstances remains to hold momentum on a larger ground of the society in today's scenario. As a result, the people who belong to this particular community were said to be marginalized, dominated, annihilated, and oppressed in the terms of postcolonial aspects. A few writers expressed their views and vision in the form of literature to overcome their struggles and to create awareness among the people belonging to the community. This was the manifestation of the path laid by Ambedkar, who remarked on the importance of Dalits through his contributions.

Literature is a powerful tool to bring out a change in society by framing the views of the author in the form of prose, poetry, essay, and play. Dalit Literature took birth due to the vital role of caste politics. This can also be considered as a part of marginalizing the Dalits in literature too. Accepting the inherent realities, the authors who were recognized in Dalit literature didn't step back. Instead, they started to draw the attention of society by narrating their struggles, laxity of grit, and determination through their autobiographical works and be recognized as Dalit writers.

Autobiographies are narratives based on individual contributions towards the society and their achievements will be written during their twilight years or after their death. But it is interesting to note

that the autobiographies seem to be different when it comes to Dalit personalities. The psychological aspects are more prominently narrated than their achievements and contributions. These aspects and trends are believed as an output of the fourfold caste system which violated the constitutional provision of equality. Based on these grounds many writers contributed various aspects as per their experience. Similarly, Dalit writer and university professor Aravind Malagatti, chronicles his experience in Government Brahmana, the first Dalit autobiography in Kannada.

Dr. Aravind Malagatti was born on 1st May 1956 at Muddebihal, a small town in Bijapur district to Yellapa, a teacher by profession, and Basavva, a homemaker. His father succumbed to a scorpion sting when the writer was only ten months old. Later his uncle brought him up, educated and supported him to settle down in the village. In his village, he completed his primary education. During his primary education, his performance was very poor. Most of the time, he would go out early and return late at night by loitering around nearby places. After he was admitted into M. G. V. College, Muddebihal for pre-university and graduation, he became a devoted student. In 1978 he joined Karnataka University, Dharwad to continue his further education. He completed his Ph.D. in folklore studies and won the Gold Medal for best thesis in 1985. In 2011 Dr. Aravind Malagatti, writer and Professor in the Kannada department, won the Rajyotsava award in the literature category because of his valuable contribution to Kannada literature. The autobiography of Aravind Malagatti, named Government Brahmana is translated into various languages including English. The English version of his autobiography is translated by Dharini Devi Malgatti, wife of the author who serves as an IPS officer. She is a passionate writer who has contributed her experiences in the form of literature. Along with Dharini, Janet Vucinich and N Subramanya have translated the original text from Kannada.

In the beginning, he justifies the title Government Brahmana by considering the benefits given by the government to Dalits in comparison to the ideology of Brahmanism which was in practice from Sanatana Dharma. The author himself justified the title Government Brahmana in his afterward. This is meant

for Dalits who were recognized by the government in the name of reservation. Here he also added that “in the society, only upper-class people with brahminical ideologies will be recognized and the rest others will be sidelined and discriminated against. Likewise, the people who belong to the Dalit community will be respected and recognized by society and all kinds of priorities given to Brahmins or upper class will be given to them in the form of reservation as a result he calls himself as Government Brahmana” ([Malagatti 121](#)). This glorifies not only the ideologies of the author but also highlights the community as well as the title of his autobiography.

Like other autobiographies, Malagatti’s Government Brahmana does not focus on the pathway of success, the achievement of the author, a timeline of a person, or the pain of Dalits in society. It speaks out and questions the system about democracy. Considering the arguments made by Isabel Wilkerson in his book titled ‘Caste’.

Society builds a trapdoor of self-reference that, without any effort on the part of people in the dominant caste, unwittingly forces on them narcissistic isolation from those assigned to lower categories. It replicates the structure of narcissistic family systems, the interplay of competing supporting roles—the golden-child middle castes of so-called model minorities, the lost-child indigenous peoples, and the scapegoat caste at the bottom. ([Wilkerson 223](#)).

The entire plot of the autobiography is based on the incidents of the author’s life, which can be discussed. Here not only the author’s life incident is documented, but it is narrated as a plight of the entire community in the form of contexts and contemplations. Here the author shares his experience as well as he contemplates a small happening in and around our daily life that affects a person physically, sociologically, and psychologically and shapes the historical ground for his development.

Malagatti begins his autobiographical work by stating that he is not trying to become Mahatma. Then he continues by registering the various sagas he witnessed in different stages of his life. The sagas reported by Malagatti are also similar to the incidents that happened in the lifetime of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was registered in his writings. Confining

the arguments in Government Brahmana author has not borrowed the ideologies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, instead, critically examines the situations and justifies his intentions by questioning that they become independent only on the papers. On the contrary, even after decades they have been condemned and colonized, not even recognized as a human in the society. As Shamshul Islam depicts in his ‘Dalits in the theory and the practices of Hindutva’, compiled in Anand Teltumbde’s ‘Hindutva and Dalits’ which rightly upholds the consequences,

The Codes or Laws of Manu are universally known as the antithesis to the existence and rights of Dalits and women. Manusmriti or Manav Dharmasastra, also known as the Laws of Manu, is believed to have been codified by the second century A.D. It presents in totality the system of jurisprudence of Hinduism. The German Indologist, Max Mueller got this translated as the ‘Laws of Manu’, which was first published in 1886 under the series, ‘The Sacred Books of the East’ Manu as an eminent learned Brahmin holds a place of reverence in the high caste Hindu world of thought. ([Teltumbde 4](#))

Considering this, we can assess why Malagatti blames the ideologies of upper-class people who failed to withstand equality among each other. To draw the attention of readers, he has narrated a few incidents that happened in his life from childhood to the adult stage. Considering the contemplation and narratives of Malagatti, as discussed in Government Brahmana, one can easily trace the influential incidents of veteran personalities who raised their voices for the rights of the marginalized from beginning to end. Accordingly, the statement from ‘Long Walk to Freedom’, the autobiography of Nelson Mandela.

Africans of my generation — and even today — generally have both English and an African name. Whites were either unable or unwilling to pronounce an African name and considered it uncivilized to have one. That day, Miss Mdingane told me that my new name was Nelson. Why she bestowed this particular name upon me I have no idea. Perhaps it had something to do with the great British sea captain Lord Nelson, but that would be only a guess ([Mandela 29](#)). Will be recollected while we go through the first chapter of Government Brahmana. Here the

author portrays how his name was misinterpreted by his friends at school in his childhood days. His name Aravind Malagatti had the caste sound of Hindu. In Sanskrit word, 'Aravind' means lotus and 'Malagatti' is the name of a pilgrimage center. This made it difficult for the upper caste to digest, as it was named after a boy who belonged to Dalit Community. Henceforth his name was misspelled by the teachers, classmates, and the localities as 'Maali' which means assistant or 'Katti' means a donkey in the regional language of the author. ([Malagatti 1](#))

At the same time, he was also insisted to sit separately on the floors and was imposed to sit on a gunny bag inside the classroom as a form of punishment which resembles the school days of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Besides, friends of his age in the village deserted him because of his caste. This made the author make many more attempts to mingle and become close with others, but it ended with disappointment. This makes us recollect lines from Kancha Iliah's "Buffalo Nationalism"

In ancient times, the Adivasis, Chandalas, and Sudras had no right to education; and hence no knowledge of a national self. Education was the prerogative of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. Colonial modernity extended the right to education to all. In the post-Independence period, a small section of the oppressed castes has got an opportunity to read and write, and have become conscious of their otherness. Now, they hear the rhetoric of the Hindutva forces: one nation, one culture, one people. This is intended only to hoodwink them. ([Iliah](#))

In the later stages, after considering his knowledge and growth in his academic practices, they stopped teasing him like earlier, considered him as a 'big man', and started treating him like an 'alien' in his village. These incidents project how Dalits were marginalized at the grass-root level of the primary and fundamental stage at the educational institutions. Each time he confronted such a circumstance, he decided to stay away from school, but his grandmother boosted him to sustain and overcome it.

In chapter 4 'The she-buffalo on heat and the he-buffalo after her', he tries to shift the paradigm of caste from human to animals. Malagatti showcases

the attention towards the mating buffaloes by quoting the examples from the mythological perspective of Non-Brahmin sage Vishwamithra and Brahmin sage Vasishtha and the animals created by them. As an amplification to this, he added that the animal created by the Brahmin sage is considered holy and a symbol of purity. The other one created by Non-Brahmin stands opposite to that and is projected as an intermixture of sex. This stimulates the perceptions of a reader about the caste system and how it has extended its scope even in the genre of animals.

Similarly, recollecting the lines from one of the chapters from 'Unfinished Gestures' narrated by Davesh Soneji which states that:

The reinvention of caste status is borne from reactions to the stigma of pre-colonial and early colonial caste legacies on the one hand, and the social potential inscribed in emergent non-Brahmin politics on the other. New non-Brahmin caste associations headed by men almost universally joined the movement to outlaw professional dancing by women from their communities. Devadasi reform thus engendered serious deliberations on the control of women's sexuality and the restoration of patrimony in these communities, even as women themselves remained largely absent from these debates. ([Soneji 114-15](#)).

This suit, to the contemplations made by Malagatti, in Chapter 11 'My Colony My Study', where he discusses, how a Dalit colony dog was killed by the upper-class people because it mated with the village sahuakar's bitch. Along with this Malagatti also elaborates his argument with readers by giving another example of prostitution in the same chapter. Here he mentions prostitutes, who were adhered to practice a profession that reflected the imposition of injustice. This was meted to Dalit women in the name of 'Jogtinis', a traditional system towards a particular caste of society.

In chapter five 'The black Cat did not turn white', he depicts the discrimination practiced and performed by the women near the areas reserved for washing clothes. Here women have differentiated the stone beds and allocated the places based on the caste which makes us to recollect the lines from Uma Chakravarti's 'Gendering Caste', which states and defines "Women are the gateways to casteism",

Under Brahmanical patriarchy women of the upper castes are regarded as gateways—literally points of entry into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity of blood has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes, so such women have to be carefully guarded. Miscegeny or hypogamous relationships represent the breakdown of the elaborate edifice of social order, epitomized in the anxiety about kaliyuga—a time when families are broken, rites are forgotten and women are defiled. ([Chakravarti 34](#))

In chapter eight there is a mention of ‘An Eastman color movie called Okuli’. He, being a research scholar from the folk stream, questioned the high caste practice in the name of Okuli. This is usually used to degrade one group of people, particularly an assault on a Dalit woman. This practice looks like a betrayal of hegemonic practices towards human dignity. This makes us recall the lines from Mandela’s ‘Long Walk to Freedom’, My life, and that of most Xhosas at the time were shaped by custom, ritual, and taboo. This was the alpha and omega of our existence and went unquestioned. Men followed the path laid out for them by their fathers; women-led the same lives as their mothers had before them as quoted in Mark Malisa’s “(Anti) Narcissms and (Anti) Capitalisms”. Confining this, he projects the menace of caste discrimination and harassment of women by the patriarchal society in the name of tradition. This makes the readers reconsider the cultural and religious practice’s influence on society with brahmanical ideologies. These provide false information through religious books and provide lies to the destruction of rituals and traditions.

Later, tracing the lines from the book ‘Flaming Feet and other essays’ narrated by a critic D R Nagaraj which suggests,

The reference to the destruction of history leads us to many other important themes, the most important among them being the will to rebuild history. The statement above is based on many assumptions of Indian history, the kind of history that colonial discourse sought to inscribe on the psyche of the subcontinent. At that stage, history, anthropology, ideological studies, and archaeology got mixed up to produce a stew that tasted delicious to many ideological groups in colonial India ([Nagaraj 153](#)).

In the perspectives discussed in chapter nine ‘Glory of janivara and shivadara,’ he compares the similarities of colonial elements like hegemony, annihilation, and marginalization. In context to the questions raised about caste practices from a nationalism point of view, Malagatti portrays the reference of his ancestor’s conversion to Veerashaivism, who were often recognized as Veerashaiva Harijans. The concept of Shaivism was influenced by the reformer Basavanna to bring out equality during the 12th century. Malagatti also mentions the caste system and its rampant practices enforced by the upper class which affected the psychological aspects of Dalits from Maharashtra. These people had focused their skeptical views towards Buddhism. Thus he tries to identify similarities in the practices of religious conversions to Buddhism in Maharashtra and Veerashaivism in Karnataka. Through this, he questions the ideologies of brahminical tendencies in the name of religion followed by purity, pollution, and vegetarianism.

On the other hand, the historical significance of casteism traces out the violence against the untouchables. In the book ‘Flaming Feet and other essays’ chronicled by D R Nagaraj, the chapter ‘Violence on Dalits and Disappearance of Village’

In more than one sense, the notion of culture includes the realms of religion in this context. Attempts to seek equal space to affirm existing religious practices have also led to bloodbaths and massive violence. Similarly, the decision to not participate in a religious and cultural event, which has demeaning roles for Dalits, can attract violence. For the last two decades or so, Dalits have increasingly declined to participate in the village festival, where there is no respectable role for them, and this has landed them in serious trouble with caste Hindus. ([Nagaraj 133](#))

Here, it seems to be relevant and finds its traces in chapter twelve ‘The government Brahmana’s devotion to lord Raghavendra’ and chapter thirteen ‘The incident of being a fake brahmin’, he acknowledges the disparity and inequality projected in the name of a caste in pilgrim and religious center of Raghavendra mutt at Mantralayam. In this saga, he reveals that he is a fan follower of veteran Kannada actor Dr. Rajkumar. Apparently, Dr. Rajkumar was



a follower of Saint Raghavendra. This made the writer follow the deity. He had entered the premises of the temple by pretending himself as a Brahmin but his identity was revealed. The aftermath of these incidents left a deeper imprint on his further life. After some days he got the opportunity to visit the temple. In order to make his visit remarkable, he gifted a sketch of Lord Raghavendra, which was nailed on the temple premises for a few days. Eventually, it was removed. This reflects the annihilation practice by the pontiff and seers associated with the mutt who signifies the inequality.

In chapter fourteen 'My ex-beloved' and chapter fifteen 'Some girls who flirt with the future demonstrate the larger factors of annihilation of caste when Malagatti falls in love with an unnamed girl who belongs to the upper caste. Both of them love each other. As Malagatti was busy writing his thesis, he was unable to respond immediately to the letters written by his beloved. This resulted in fasting as she did not eat for twenty days. Her sister visited Aravind and said to him:

You are a fool,

She is a fool too...

Aravind, she has stopped eating food.

(Malagatti 75)

After the successful completion of six years of their healthy relationship, she came with two photographs and asked Malagatti to choose the better one as her husband. She came to this decision considering her two younger sisters. If she gets married to a Dalit, then none from their community would marry them. This incident in the author's life projects how caste plays a vital role in building relationships.

In chapter eighteen 'Marxism and the plate after the meal' Malagatti speaks about people who considered themselves as Marxists and practice caste in the name of Atheism. This resulted in questioning the Hindu Brahminical ideologies and their tendencies which marginalized the people in the name of tradition and culture.

Usually, Dalit autobiographies and writings speak about marginalization and sufferings that resemble the grit and determination of blacks narrated by Latin American writers. Similarly, Government Brahmana also reflects by the autobiographical work

of Maya Angelou titled 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' which illustrates apartheid and social inequality by Europeans towards Africans, Thus the contexts discussed and contemplated by Malagatti in Government Brahmana look like a battle of an individual who confronted the construction of self in the society of brahminical ideologies throughout the plot. At the same time, the incidents also trace the lines of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar from 'Castes in India' which depicts,

Indian Peninsula concerning the unity of its culture. It has not only a geographic unity, but it has over and above all a deeper and a much more fundamental unity-the indubitable cultural unity that covers the land from end to end. But it is because of this homogeneity that Caste becomes a problem so difficult to be explained. If the Hindu Society was a mere federation of mutually excluded units the matter would be simple enough. But Caste is a parceling of an already homogeneous unit, and the explanation of the genesis of Caste is the explanation of this process of parceling. ([Ambedkar: Castes in India 3](#))

Similarly, Government Brahmana depicts the hegemonic practices of the upper-caste towards the weaker section in the educational institutions, and religious centers. It also depicts the brutality shown towards the women in the name of culture. The depiction of merciless behavior towards a dog enlightens the perspective of readers who think beyond casteism.

## Conclusion

Malagatti's writing is not just interpreted as an autobiography. Instead, the chaos of marginalization and the consciousness of 'constructing the self' happens simultaneously. There is an identity born after tackling the hurdles during the aftermath of the freedom struggle. Here, the significance of autobiography and its plot speaks about the domination and discrimination of Dalit writers in society. Secondly, the contexts discussed by Malagatti also recognize the identity woes of Dalits. Lastly, the narrative technique of Malagatti is also impressive because of the dialect of North Karnataka. The same was unaltered by the translators which helped to glorify the ideology of the author and strengthened his intention in translated versions too.

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