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## Identity Crisis and Search for ‘Self’ in Aravind Malagatti’s *The Government Brahmana*

**R. Janani, M.A., M.Phil., NET**

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### Abstract

The Dalit literature represents the plight and agony of the community in all its writing. In a way, the Dalit writer ‘familiarizes’ the problems of the community so that the reader would have a better understanding of Dalits. ‘The Government Brahmana’ is the English translation of Aravind Malagatti’s autobiography in Kannada. Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich and N. Subramanya have translated this autobiography. This autobiographical narrative is in the form of episodes from the author’s childhood and youth. The writer in the novel has given a complete study of “Maali community” in Karnataka. The details in the novel are completely trustworthy since the writer himself is

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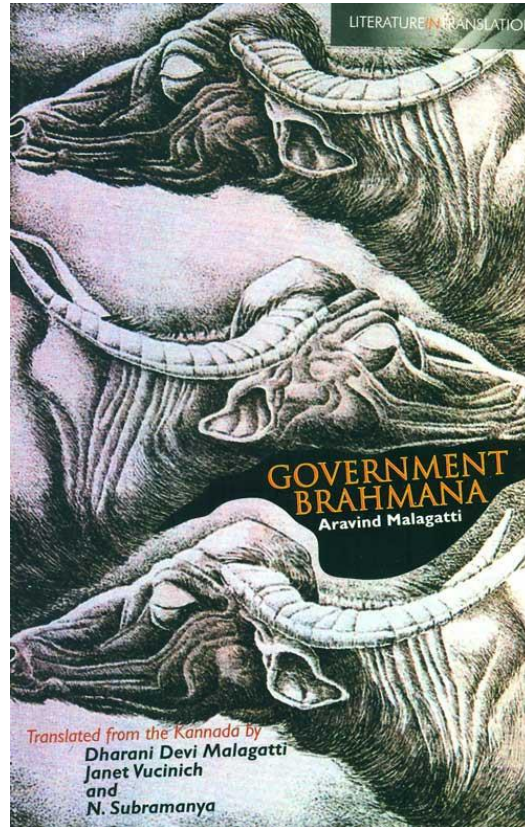
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a witness to the problems. The isolation, suppression and alienation that an individual faces in Maali community are recorded in minute details. The insult and injury faced by Dalits is portrayed within the reality of the situation. The writer has therefore captivated the minds of the reader through his writing. The writing is very effective, where Malagatti does not only lament but raises a voice against the unjust treatment shown towards Dalits. He makes a non-Dalit think about the condition of Dalit people.

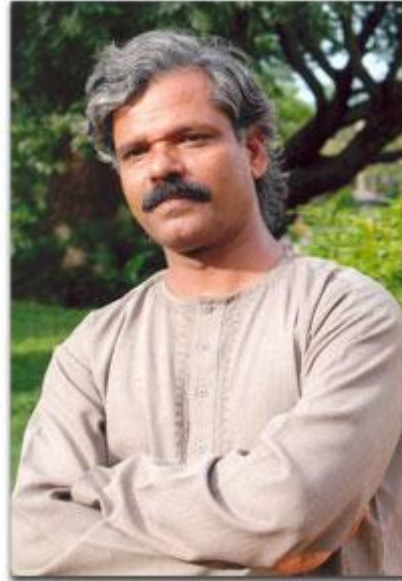
This paper focuses on the concept of search for the 'self'. The condition of most Dalits remains the same, even after many from the community get good education and receive higher status in society. The affirmative action through job reservation in government service has helped many to come up in all fields including professional fields and government administration. In this book, they are referred to as 'Government Brahmana', presumably because of governmental help which helped them to attain higher levels in society and services. The paper focuses on Aravind Malagatti's search for an individual Dalit's identity after attaining a certain status in society. The paper presents insight into the Dalit's search for identity in society.



## **Dalit Literature**

Dalit literature focuses on fundamental human values to establish secular values like individuality, liberty, fraternity, and equality which have been denied them for ages. The motto of Dalit literature is to raise a voice of protest against the unjust social order prevailing for centuries. Dalit literature brings to light the ancient Hindu literature which was Brahmanic and which excluded Dalits by denying them equality of social participation. A human being is not born as a Dalit, or untouchable; it is the system that degrades them. Aravind Malagatti has brought this idea into the novel very well. In *The Government Brahmana*, he questions the society that degrades the individual in the name of caste.

### **Aravind Malagatti, a Great Writer, Teacher, Researcher and Social Activist**



**Dr. Aravind Malagatti**

Courtesy: <http://dalitindia.in/author.HTML>

Professor Aravind Malagatti is a leading creative writer in Kannada. He is also a well known critic in Kannada. He is a folk-lore scholar, a versatile writer, critic, working and publishing tirelessly. He has written on old Kannada poetry. He is also an active Dalit activist in the Dalit movement. At present he is working as Professor of Kannada in

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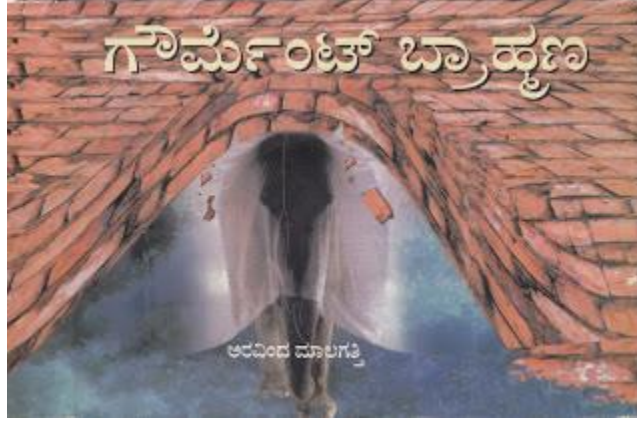
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Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, Mysore University. Aravind Malagatti's contribution to Kannada literature and Kannada Studies are very significant.

### Individual Identity Crisis



Kannada Title

Aravind Malagatti's *The Government Brahmana* is the first Dalit autobiography (1994) in Kannada. This text has been translated by Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich and N. Subramanya. In exploring the text one has to see the collective consciousness of being a Dalit and the individual identity crisis. The autobiography of a Dalit, therefore, traces the individual identity among the collective community. The text is not a lamentation. This text scrutinizes the search for 'self' by an individual, which reflects the plight of the whole Dalit community's search for identity.

### The Narrative

The story is about an ordinary Dalit and his experience is chosen to create a social change. The story questions the 'self' in every form and makes even a Non-Dalit to think. The writer breaks down the boundaries of the individual, of caste and race and he has given the most minute details from slices of his life. The text in a way breaks the cliché of the stereotypic representations of the Dalit. The writer has chosen to present only the facts. Therefore, a variety of the behavior of Dalits is mentioned in the novel. The book generated many controversies even among his family members. Malagatti, however, did not bother about the criticism, but he has made every individual realize their self.

### The Opening

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The autobiography opens with the following lines where Malagatti addresses the readers directly: “I do not have any illusions of becoming Mahatma by presenting these few pages of my life story. I am quite ordinary” (1). In these sentences, Malagatti intends to say that he may not be as great as *mahatma*, but he is an individual, ‘a self’ who has his own dreams and ambitions. Through his autobiography he wishes that the readers would come to know about the problems of an ordinary Dalit. Indeed, they would be the first readers of his life experiences.

### **The Maali Community**

Malagatti belonged to the Maali community, and he is referred to by the upper caste people only by the name of his community. Wherever he went he couldn’t reveal his real identity. To his white-collared friends, if he revealed his identity, they would not understand, but would only be bewildered by him. If he had to go to his old friends as a white-collared gentleman, they would not accept him as before.

### **Traditions**

Malagatti has presented the tradition and the ritual followed by Maali community in the novel. In the chapter “Coins on the Corpse and the Wedding Feast”, he discusses the tradition that is followed in the three upper class families, namely, Shetjis, Marathis and Veerashaivas. In the Veerashaiva families, there is a custom of throwing coins on the corpse during the funeral procession. This ritual can happen only if Dalits come to pick up the coins. This act was considered by the upper caste people as the act of redemption.

Dalits were called for the wedding feast. This incident happened in Shetjis daughter’s wedding where Dalits of the surrounding villages outnumbered other communities in the village. There were always rules imposed on Dalits during these occasions.

1. Not to ask for more food.
2. To accept only as much food as you can eat.
3. Not to carry any food home.
4. While going home after the meal, they should dip their hands in the ink kept outside. (10)

## **Dalits at School**

At school, Dalits had to perform sweeping classrooms and other rooms, and were given other manual tasks. But they had to sit only on the floor. The children from upper castes would be allowed to sit on the benches. Teachers treated the Dalit students different from other students. The most severe punishment was the corporal punishment at school, which was very crudely practiced on Dalit students.

Aravind Malagatti was not called by his fellow students of upper castes by his name, but they insulted him by calling him as katti. ('katti' means donkey or ass). At every level of school, a Dalit has no self identity. Thus, at school also there was prejudice shown against the Dalit students.

## **Right to Water Denied**

The next most important and the basic necessity is 'Water' and this right is also denied to Dalits. Even to fetch water, the people from lower caste communities are asked to go to the pond rather than the lake. Here 'Pond' referred is smaller, muddier, whereas the lake is bigger, clearer that caters to the upper caste communities of the village. To wash clothes, further problems would have to be faced. Malagatti's grandmother and his family members used to go to the ditches to wash clothes. The ditches they used were filled with water only during the rainy season and in summer they would vanish without a trace. Even the leeches, cattle, and every other organism swam along in the ditches. Sometimes even shit comes floating when the clothes were getting washed. Malagatti has recorded in minute detail the plight of Dalits which he not only laments, but also questions:

“Have you ever taken bath in such gutter water?”

“Have you washed your clothes in it?”

“Have you gargled with the same water and also cleaned your teeth?” (31).

## **The Okuli Festival**

The “Okuli” festival is another tradition of the village and the most important tradition of the untouchable colony. It is a custom that Okuli festival is celebrated every year in Shravana (i.e.) between August-September. The tradition of Okuli is in a way, a disturbing tradition that degraded the dignity of Dalit women. The tradition is to make Dalit women remove their blouses and wear *angagachche*. Standing opposite to these women were Non-Dalit and Non-Brahmin men. These men would fill their sacks with yellow and red coloured water (a mixture of turmeric and vermilion powder) and splash it with force on the women. The women had to dodge and beat up the men with the long canes held in their hands. This was sort of a traditional sport. This tradition was performed in order to retain the prosperity of the village. It was assumed that there would be no rain, crops infected with pests and the village plagued by diseases if this festival was not celebrated. This belief of the upper caste about the curse was actually believed and the ritual performed not by them, but by the Dalits of the village. The Dalit men and women who feared these superstitions fall prey to them in the name of tradition. There are even certain other traditions which are more disgusting even to know. At some places they still hold programmes like ‘feeding shit to the Dalits’. This act is referred to as ‘Mala Prashana’ ‘Ameedhya Prashana’ to refer to this feeding shit as though it were a sacred act of worship. This act may be disturbing and disgusting, but this was (is?) the real condition of these Dalits.

### **Study under the Street Light**

Malagatti mentions how he studied in his colony. His colony was near the prostitutes’ colony. No houses in Dalit lane could afford electricity. Malagatti had to study only under the street light (like many other poor people from other castes); even for this there was lot of opposition. Dalits not only lost their self-respect in the name of caste, they even lost their identity, since Dalits were also economically downtrodden. Many poor, illiterate and landless people were also subjected to such degradation, but their caste identity was always upheld by these poor people and others.

### **Devotion to Gods and Frustration**

As a young boy Malagatti had great affinity and devotion towards Lord Raghavendra. Malagatti drew a picture of Lord Raghavendra and donated to the Raghavendra temple in the village. Malagatti zealously gifted the framed picture to the temple. The priest was his father’s friend, so at first the priest accepted and appreciated

the painting and kept it inside the temple. Inside the rampart the priest performed some kind of worship by sprinkling holy water for purification on the painting. About this purification, however, Malagatti did not bother and felt happy about his painting in the temple. Later when Malagatti visited the temple he could not find any trace of his painting anywhere. This incident really had a telling effect on Malagatti and even created an aversion in him towards gods.

### **Personal Love – Inter-Caste Marriage Was/Is Impossible**

Malagatti expresses and describes his lost love in the chapter, “My ex-beloved”. In this chapter Malagatti does not only talk about his own lost love, but he also acts as a symbolic representation of the Dalit community. The condition of every ordinary Dalit and their love towards a Non-Dalit is always a lost cause. Though he knew in the very depths of his heart that his love would not succeed, and yet he could not keep away from his lady love. He knew nothing could change the condition of a Dalit.

Malagatti’s lady love once says her wish to her love,

“Aravind could you have been born at least as a Lingayat?” (70).

She did not have any idea of deceiving Malagatti. Her love knew no bounds, whereas the caste she belonged to, denied him the right to her hand, destroying all his dreams and desires.

### **Patronizing**

Malagatti was always haunted by his Dalit identity wherever he went. Whenever he was invited by his friends for lunch, there would always be his caste mentioned. Once, Malagatti was invited by his Marxist friend for tea. His friend was a Marxist; so Malagatti thought his friend had extended his friendly hands to everyone, but when they were chatting his friend commented,

‘I don’t believe in caste discrimination,

Many harijans come home, have tea and food...’ (97).



These words did hurt Malagatti a lot. This was not the first time he was listening to such words. The question of identity troubled him every time, and wherever he went the mention of his caste disturbed him. Malagatti says the word ‘Harijan’ tormented him,

“Not the boundary, the harijan, I felt the yelling words that would have sounded shrill with agitation. But my words could not be heard. I could not even show my face to them” (98).

### **Ghost of Caste in Inner Psyche**

Even after the Dalits have got some rights and are able to receive good education and improved financial status, the ghost of caste does not stop haunting the inner psyche.

### **Earlier Generation and Their Vision of Independence**

Malagatti’s father, when he got appointed as a government teacher, faced all such discriminations in the village. Even the headmaster and the teachers of the school who belonged to other Non-Dalit communities warned Malagatti’s father to leave the school. Even the fellow colleagues did not show him the mercy of offering a seat. Thus Malagatti’s father finally managed to get a transfer to another school. In the new school also his father had to work with many restrictions, since a Dalit teaching a non-Dalit was not accepted by the people of the village.

When India got its independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, Malagatti’s father asked his family members to prepare *holige* ( a sweet dish usually prepared only for festive reasons). He went to everybody’s house in the lane and fed them with sweets, sharing the celebration of the freedom. The second most important thing he did was to gather all young people in the lane and going to the temple well and drawing water. The other non-Dalits in the village stared at them aghast, because it was a complete revolt against the rules imposed on Dalits. The upper caste people felt surprise and horror at the same time seeing the act of Dalits drawing water from the well, splashing it on the ground and enjoying themselves.

### **Meaning of Freedom for Various Groups and Communities**

The freedom of India thus had produced different reactions on different people. As Malagatti says,

“For Vivekananda had his own idea of a new nation.”

“Sardar Patel’s idea of the nation revolved around gallantry and vigour.”

“Nehru had a vision of a modern India”

“Gandhiji had a vision of the Rama Rajya or the ideal nation.”

“Ambedkar had the idea of a land where human rights could be claimed” (113).

But for an ordinary person, for an ordinary Dalit like Malagatti’s father, freedom is nothing but the drawing of water from the village well like other caste people. The very next day as usual, they reverted to the same old way of drawing water from the well meant only for them, located outside the village. This is the condition of Dalits in many villages of India, even in the post-independent era. Malagatti questions this denial of Dalits for ages and he has become the voice for his whole community whose struggle still continues.

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R. Janani, M.A., M.Phil., NET  
Assistant Professor of English  
Department Of English  
DRBCCC’s Hindu College

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Pattabiram  
Chennai- 600072  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[universityjanfriends@gmail.com](mailto:universityjanfriends@gmail.com)