



CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION AND REPRESENTATION OF DALIT EXPERIENCES IN ARAVIND MALAGATTI'S *GOVERNMENT BRAHMANA*

¹Dr. B. Deepa Jyothi and ²Vinodh Kumar, Bhukya

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal, TS

²Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal, TS

Abstract

The present paper explores how Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* (1994) undertakes the task of cultural reconstruction by representing Dalit experiences, which are historically unwritten by dominant caste narratives. Cultural reconstruction, in this context, refers to the critical process of retrieving, reinterpreting, and revalidating marginalized experiences, practices, traditions, and collective memories so as to challenge hegemonic representations and establish alternative narratives. For Dalit communities, such reconstruction is indispensable because their lived realities—marked by caste discrimination, ritual exclusion, and systemic subordination—have been persistently misrepresented or silenced within mainstream historiography and literature. Through a close study of Malagatti's autobiography, the paper demonstrates how personal memory and communal memory intersect to reconstitute Dalit identity and culture. *Government Brahmana* narrates episodes of humiliation, resistance, and survival not merely as individual experiences but as emblematic of a broader social history. By foregrounding oral traditions, childhood recollections, and community practices, Malagatti destabilizes the myth of a monolithic Indian culture and recasts Dalit life as a site of agency, dignity, and creativity. The present paper two interlinked functions such as reconstruction of Dalit culture, drawing upon suppressed knowledge systems and representation of Dalit experiences that confronts the politics of privilege embedded in mainstream discourse. *Government Brahmana* exemplifies how Dalit life experiences operate as a mode of cultural critique, social resistance and historical redress. By revisiting the past through the lens of lived experiences, Malagatti contributes by reshaping collective memory and envisioning a more equitable cultural future.

Keywords: Cultural Reconstruction, Dalit Autobiography, Representation, Collective Memory, Counter-History

I

Government Brahmana (1994), an autobiography, by Aravind Malagatti stands as a landmark in the history of Dalit life-writing in Kannada. It is not only a personal narrative but also a cultural document that seeks to reconstruct a socio-cultural history and lived experience silenced by dominant discourses. For centuries, Dalit social and cultural histories, traditions, and subjectivities have been excluded from mainstream historiography and literary canons, resulting in the erasure of their cultural memories and the distortion of their social realities. In the present context, cultural reconstruction becomes an essential intellectual and cultural study. It refers to the deliberate effort to retrieve, reinterpret and revalidate marginalized knowledge systems, practices and collective memories in order to produce an alternative vision of the past and to reclaim dignity, agency and self-representation.

Malagatti blends individual and communal memory to produce a narrative, which critiques and resists the hegemonic structures of caste. By weaving together his own life story with collective experiences of oppression, humiliation, and survival, the text exposes the mechanisms of caste-based exclusion while simultaneously asserting Dalit identity as dynamic and evolving rather than fixed or subordinate. This duality—personal yet collective—allows the text to operate as a counter-cultural history that destabilizes the privileged perspectives of mainstream Indian society and literature. At the heart of this process lies the representation of Dalit experiences. Representation here does not simply mean depiction but rather the act of re-narrating life stories from a subaltern standpoint, thereby challenging inherited stereotypes and essentialist notions. Malagatti achieves this through his attention to oral traditions, familial narratives, everyday practices, and the intimate details of Dalit childhood and community life. These narrative strategies elevate the quotidian to the level of cultural testimony, foregrounding the very practices and memories that dominant discourses have ignored or delegitimized. In doing so, *GB* both preserves and transforms



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Dalit culture: it preserves the experiences of exclusion and pain while transforming them into sources of knowledge, solidarity, and resistance.

Cultural reconstruction in *GB* also speaks to the broader question of why Dalit culture must be revisited and reinterpreted through lived experiences. For communities historically denied access to institutional power and formal education, oral history and memory become vital tools of survival and identity. By narrating his own life “from within,” Malagatti refuses the mediating gaze of the upper-caste or academic observer and instead centers the Dalit subject as both narrator and interpreter of history. The strategy undermines the legitimacy of caste-based authority and claims the right to define one’s own existence, values, and aspirations. Furthermore, the text’s ironic title, *GB*, draws attention to the contradictions and complexities of postcolonial Indian society, where state policies and institutional frameworks coexist with entrenched caste hierarchies. The autobiography interrogates how these systems simultaneously provide opportunities for mobility and reinforce boundaries of exclusion. In reclaiming this terrain, Malagatti highlights the agency of Dalits in navigating, negotiating, and contesting structures of power. Thus, the text does not only chronicle suffering but also foregrounds resilience, selfhood, and the desire for cultural renewal.

The paper situates *GB* within the theoretical framework of cultural reconstruction and representation, arguing that Malagatti’s narrative serves as both a counter-history and a creative re-imagining of Dalit culture. It examines how the text mobilizes memory, oral tradition, and autobiographical techniques to reconstruct a marginalized past while representing Dalit life as complex, multidimensional, and historically significant. By doing so, the paper underscores the importance of Dalit life-writing as a form of social critique, cultural reclamation, and epistemic justice.

II

Government Brahmana begins with Malagatti calling his life ‘ordinary,’ a statement that immediately unsettles conventional expectations of Dalit life-writing. By foregrounding ordinariness, Malagatti raises fundamental questions: what makes a life narratable? Is *GB* representative of Dalit identity in general, or is it a deeply individual testimony? This apprehension between personal and collective identity lies at the heart of subaltern autobiographies. When Malagatti declares, “I would like to read my life on my own and I would also like to be the first reader of my life,” (1) he asserts the autonomy of self-representation. For too long, Dalit lives have been interpreted through external lenses—be it Brahminical historiography, colonial ethnography, or elite literary forms. Malagatti insists on reclaiming the interpretive authority of his own narrative.

Malagatti acknowledges that his choice of subject matter stirred unease within his family and community, as Dalit autobiographies often break silences that caste and society prefer to keep hidden. Yet, he insists on narrating experiences directly, without embellishment or artifice. He asserts that “the dalitism of a dalit could be captured lucidly by the direct narration of experiences” (2) reflects a philosophy of authenticity: truth-telling as resistance. Unlike mainstream autobiographies that often cultivate an “image” or project an idealized self, Malagatti seeks to foreground the raw, unmediated quality of lived experience. This emphasis on directness aligns his work with the oral traditions of storytelling, where immediacy and communal sharing take precedence over literary polish. Thus, he says “therefore, I have adopted this style” (2). When confronted by his uncle regarding the appropriateness of his content, Malagatti responds in a characteristically layered manner. He first acknowledges the uncle’s influence and role in his upbringing—demonstrating respect and relational ethics—but then asserts that narrating such experiences requires a “brave heart.” This gesture highlights the courage involved in disrupting social norms through testimony. For Malagatti, autobiography is not an indulgent act of self-expression but an ethical responsibility to bear witness to the structural conditions that have shaped his existence. His reflections further challenge the notion of autobiography as a curated cultivated presence. Instead, he speaks of the radiance of authentic life experience, suggesting that authenticity itself carries a form of luminosity—an inner truth that shines more powerfully than any carefully constructed image. The insistence on authenticity resonates with subaltern theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak’s concern with representation: the subaltern can only speak meaningfully if their words are not mediated or



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reshaped to fit elite cultural expectations. Malagatti situates his narrative method within the oral tradition by recalling his grandmother's storytelling. Her tales exemplify a cultural practice of sharing experiences not merely for entertainment but as a mode of seeking meaning, coping with suffering, and interpreting life's unpredictable turns. By invoking this oral heritage, Malagatti embeds his autobiography within a continuum of collective memory-making. His life story, then, is not only an individual assertion of identity but also part of a larger cultural practice of sustaining community through narrative.

Malagatti's asserts that he wishes to read his life on his own and be the first reader of his experiences: "I would like to read my life on my own and I would also like to be the first reader of my life" (1). It serves as a manifesto of narrative autonomy and self-representation. In a society where Dalit lives have historically been interpreted, misrepresented, or silenced by dominant castes, Malagatti reclaims his right to interpret his life on his own terms. The statement is not merely autobiographical but political, as it challenges Brahminical authority over knowledge and meaning-making. Thus, in declaring his ordinariness, Malagatti not only resists sanctification but also affirms the dignity of lived Dalit experiences, while asserting the subaltern's capacity to speak, interpret, and inscribe history from within. A fundamental dilemma within Dalit aesthetics is explained when he was asked:

'Why should you write that our women drink liquor, that in our community they do this and that? Is it not tantamount to defaming ourselves? You should write about our acquaintances with great people and how well-known we are. Instead, you write about things that are of no use to anyone.' (Malagatti 3)

The uncle's objection to the novel *Kaaru* rests on the belief that portraying women drinking liquor or highlighting stigmatized practices amounts to defaming the community. For him, literature ought to function as a means of respectability politics, foregrounding the community's associations with great people and narratives of recognition rather than exposing its internal struggles. Such a perspective reveals the influence of traditional values that privilege dignity and pride over self-exposure. Malagatti, however, acknowledges his uncle's reasoning without fully conceding to it. By noting that "one cannot complain about all that is traditional," (Malagatti 3) he recognizes the cultural logic behind his uncle's stance. Yet his silence signals a more profound awareness: Dalit literature, as articulated by Sharan Kumar Limbale, is not primarily a vehicle for glorification but an "aesthetics of protest" in which the act of writing becomes a form of resistance. In this sense, the uncle's critique inadvertently highlights the radical departure that Dalit writing makes from normative literary expectations. Rather than erasing discomforting truths, Dalit literature insists on confronting them, even at the cost of communal unease: whether literature should safeguard the community's public image through narratives of honor or expose its raw social realities to challenge structures of caste and oppression.

Malagatti portrays a striking caste-based social hierarchies as they are enacted even in moments of collective grief. The description of Dalits scrambling for coins at a Veera Shaiva funeral foreground the structural entrenchment of caste subjugation, wherein economic survival is inextricably tied to ritualized humiliation.

Once the money thrown on the corpse fell on the ground, it was the job of the dalits to fight among themselves to pick up the coins. If there were no dalits, what worth would their coins have? The coins were thrown such that they would roll through the feet of the corpse-bearers and the mourners who followed them. Walking on the coins was an act of redemption for them. After everyone had walked on them, we had to pick up the coins. (Malagatti 7)

It exemplifies what Ranajit Guha terms "the politics of the subaltern," in which the lowest strata of society are simultaneously marginalized and made indispensable within dominant cultural practices. The Dalits are not merely passive observers of the ritual but constitute its very condition of possibility— "if there were no dalits, what worth would their coins have?" The act of throwing coins thus reproduces caste hierarchies: for the dominant caste, it becomes a symbolic gesture of piety and prestige; for the Dalits, it translates into a desperate struggle for subsistence, mediated through indignity. By chronicling the dehumanizing experiences of his community, Malagatti transforms memory into a form of resistance. He illustrates how caste domination extends beyond material deprivation into the



symbolic realm, where Dalits are inscribed as necessary “others” in ritual practices but denied dignity within them. The coins, marked as sacred through the act of trampling, embody this paradox: they acquire value only after being desecrated under the feet of the upper castes, and yet they remain the sole source of livelihood for the Dalits. Further, the text underscores the Foucauldian notion of power as diffuse and pervasive (Foucault 93). Caste hierarchies regulate not only social interactions but also ritualized performances of grief, embedding domination into the very fabric of everyday life. Dalits are both present and invisible—summoned to legitimize the ritual, yet excluded from its meaning. Malagatti’s narrative exposes this tension by reclaiming the Dalit perspective, thereby challenging the silence historically imposed on subaltern voices. He critiques the cultural logic of caste, which sustains itself through ritualized acts of exclusion, and simultaneously affirms the Dalit subject’s agency to narrate, resist, and transform humiliation into testimony.

Malagatti recalls the stark contrast between the everyday diet of Dalit families and the celebratory abundance reserved for upper-caste rituals. The memory of anticipating food items such as rice and saaru, usually denied in their quotidian lives, reveals how caste regulates even the most basic human need, access to nourishment. The public announcement of the feast: “a feast for the entire village!” (Malagatti 9) is marked by exclusionary undertones, since Dalits were present only as subordinate participants rather than equal celebrants. The description underscores Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that subaltern lives are often “spoken for” and positioned at the margins of dominant discourse (25). The text demonstrates how rituals of food and festivity reproduce caste hierarchies: while the Shettiji’s family consolidates status through largesse, Dalits derive only momentary pleasure, which highlights their structural deprivation. Food here becomes symbolic capital, functioning as a marker of both privilege and deprivation. As Sharmila Rege argues, “the politics of everyday life in caste society is inscribed on the body through hunger, humiliation, and ritual exclusion” (102). Malagatti’s reflection thus performs what Sharan Kumar Limbale calls the “aesthetics of protest,” converting lived humiliation into a form of resistant narration (19).

Dalits of the surrounding villages also attended Shettiji’s daughter’s marriage. Of course, for the meal. That day, the dalits had outnumbered the others. Shettiji’s compound was quite big. It had two gates—at the back and at the front. We were not allowed through the front gate... Seeing Shettiji was like seeing god. Did I not mention that the Veershaiva workers used to lord over in Shettiji’s house? These mere workers would stand holding sticks. Sticks used to hit dogs and pigs—the same were used to control us. Only after serving all the other people of the village, were the dalits allowed to eat. So many dalits had gathered on that day, that Aayi remarked: ‘Such a mob flooding in today— might be three batches at least...’ (Malagatti 9)

Malagatti recounts the discriminatory practices embedded within seemingly communal events like weddings. The Dalits, though numerically dominant at Shettiji’s daughter’s marriage, remain socially marginalized, restricted to the back gate and treated with the same instruments of discipline as animals. The symbolic policing of space—entry only through the back gate—demonstrates what Michel Foucault identifies as the spatialization of power, where control is exercised not merely through law but through ritualized regulation of bodies (*Discipline and Punish* 141). His comparison of Shettiji to a god foregrounds the deification of caste privilege, exposing how feudal-patron relationships are sanctified within village society. As Gopal Guru observes, caste functions by naturalizing hierarchies as part of “common sense,” thereby rendering humiliation an everyday experience for Dalits (“Dalit Women Talk Differently” 81). The sticks carried by Veerashaiva workers mark a further irony: subalternized caste groups, themselves positioned in relations of servitude, enforce domination over Dalits, reinforcing Ranajit Guha’s concept of “the politics of the subaltern,” where structures of power replicate themselves even among the oppressed (Selected Subaltern Studies 7). The delay in serving food until upper castes had eaten reinforces the ritualization of humiliation, echoing Sharmila Rege’s insight that “hunger is never merely biological in caste society, but is mediated through graded systems of social exclusion” (*Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 112). Despite their overwhelming presence, Dalits were denied dignity, which highlights the paradox of “numerical strength without social power.”



Malagatti documents the humiliating conditions imposed on Dalits during festive meals, noting that during festive meals, certain rules had to be followed. The commandants standing at the gate, with a long stick, would let them in only after briefing them about these rules:

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, we should dip our hands in the ink kept outside” (Malagatti 11).

He further emphasizes:

these rules were not applicable to the other people of the village. Those people were served on plantain leaves. Only dalits were made to dip their hands in coloured water, for the fear of them flocking again to eat for the second time. This was like the indelible ink mark placed on the nail of the index finger at election time (Malagatti 11).

The description highlights the institutionalized humiliation embedded in the seemingly charitable practice of feeding Dalits. The imposition of separate rules—especially the requirement to dip hands in ink—marks Dalits with visible signs of exclusion, transforming acts of basic survival into performances of subjugation. Malagatti’s metaphorical comparison of the ink mark to electoral indelibility exposes the irony of Indian democracy, wherein Dalits remain stigmatized despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Malagatti’s schooling experiences provide a lens to examine the intersection of caste, social exclusion, and educational inequality in rural India. From an early age, he was positioned as an outsider within the educational space, subjected to both overt and subtle forms of discrimination. The structural inequalities of caste were reproduced in school routines, interactions with teachers, and peer dynamics, reflecting what B.R. Ambedkar critiques in *Annihilation of Caste* as the normalization of “graded inequality” in social institutions. In the classroom, Dalit children like Malagatti were often stigmatized for their social background, with teachers and upper-caste students reinforcing hierarchies through both pedagogy and informal social policing. The very act of attending school became an ambivalent site of empowerment and humiliation: while education promised access to knowledge and potential social mobility, it simultaneously exposed Dalit children to social scorn, internalized inferiority, and cultural alienation. As Gopal Guru observes, Dalit experiences in formal education are often marked by a “dual consciousness,” in which the subaltern must negotiate between the dominant norms of schooling and the lived realities of caste oppression (“Dalit Women Talk Differently” 81). Malagatti’s narrative also highlights the role of community and family in mediating educational access. His mother (aayi) and other family members were crucial in supporting his schooling, often navigating societal obstacles to ensure his attendance. Yet, these efforts were constrained by material deprivation and social stigma, illustrating how caste hierarchies extend beyond overt oppression into everyday survival strategies. From a subaltern perspective, his schooling experiences embody both resistance and endurance: Dalit children occupy educational spaces not merely as passive subjects of oppression but as agents negotiating their presence and identity, aligning with Sharan Kumar Limbale’s notion of the “aesthetics of protest” in Dalit life (Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature 19).

Do you know what the offences were that deserved such severe punishments? Not that we did our homework; nor where we untidy. The reason was that we skipped sweeping the classroom sometimes before the morning prayers at school. It was mandatory that we, friends from the lane, should come early to the school and sweep it fully!...We were four from our lane there—Devappa, Mallappa, Basavantappa and me. The name of the person who had to sweep the classroom the next day would be written on the black board. They seemed to have an aversion towards writing our names properly on the board. So they twisted our names into Devya, Malya and Basya while writing. Initially, the great teacher did this work. Later the duty was transferred to the class leader. The work of sweeping was always confined to us. (Malagatti 14)



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Malagatti illustrates the ritualized discrimination and caste-based marginalization that permeated his schooling experience. The punitive measures described—being subjected to severe punishment for failing to sweep the classroom—highlight how everyday tasks were codified as mechanisms of control over Dalit children. The expectation that Malagatti and his peers sweep the classroom before morning prayers demonstrates how seemingly innocuous routines were loaded with social hierarchies, reinforcing subaltern subordination from an early age. The distortion of students' names on the blackboard—from Devappa, Mallappa, and Basavantappa to Devya, Malya, and Basya—reflects a subtle but pervasive form of symbolic violence. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power helps illuminate this practice: schools functioned as sites where power was exercised over bodies, behavior, and identity, shaping Dalit children into subordinate social positions (Discipline and Punish 141). The fact that the duty of sweeping was permanently confined to Malagatti and his peers underscores the institutionalization of caste-based labor within the ostensibly neutral space of education. While Dalit children were forced to perform menial tasks and endure ridicule, the act of documenting these experiences transforms humiliation into testimony. It reveals the intersection of caste, education, and structural oppression, highlighting how the schooling system both reproduced and legitimized broader social hierarchies. Moreover, the communal aspect—where peers from the same lane shared the burden—reflects the collective experience of subaltern childhood, where identity and solidarity were negotiated within imposed boundaries of exclusion. Thus, he demonstrates how Dalit autobiographical writing becomes an instrument for exposing the microphysics of caste power and the lived realities of subjugation in everyday life.

Malagatti engages in a critical and satirical interrogation of the logic underlying caste hierarchies. By drawing analogies with the animal kingdom, he challenges the rigid and often arbitrary distinctions imposed on human beings: "A male horse mates with a female horse and produces offspring. Similarly a dog mates with a bitch to produce puppies. Can a horse mate with a bitch? No! So what is caste after all?" (Malagatti 18). The reasoning exposes the constructed nature of caste as a socio-cultural category rather than a biologically ordained principle. He critiques the ideological manipulation of mythology that seeks to naturalize social divisions. The rhetorical question—"Is it wise to differentiate among human beings as superior and inferior?" (Malagatti 18) highlights the inherent contradiction in claiming human intelligence while simultaneously upholding hierarchical segregation. Moreover, his description highlights the tension between social convention and natural law. Malagatti asserts that while different castes are artificially segregated, human beings are biologically capable of unrestricted intermingling, thereby exposing caste discrimination as both irrational and unethical. By combining logic, satire, and biological analogy, Malagatti dismantles normative hierarchies and prompts readers to reconsider the ethical and rational foundations of caste discrimination, situating his work as a crucial intervention in the discourse on social justice and equality.

He illustrates the deeply entrenched spatial and social segregation that governed everyday life for Dalits, even in seemingly mundane activities like washing clothes. Malagatti notes that "this lake has washing stones at five places, as though to represent the four varnas and the fifth for the outcastes" (27), highlighting how caste hierarchies were inscribed into the very geography of the village. The deliberate allocation of spaces for different castes enforces a symbolic and material separation, where even access to a natural resource becomes a site of domination and social policing. His account also foregrounds the agency and collective resistance of Dalit women. He observes that his mother (*avva*) and other women "used to set out together from the house to wash clothes. They also took a few women from the neighbouring houses along with them. This, in a way, was to gather a troop—in case any upper caste person began a fight" (Malagatti 27). By organizing collectively, these women negotiated the threats posed by upper-caste aggression, transforming acts of survival into subtle forms of resistance. He further exposes the pervasive social stigma imposed on Dalits. Upper-caste villagers expressed their contempt through verbal abuse, asking:

Upper Caste: What great caste is yours?

You eat beef!

Lower caste: What yours? An upper caste?

You eat dead animals! (Malagatti 28).



The verbal exchanges reveal how dietary practices were deployed as markers of caste purity and social hierarchy, emphasizing exclusion and the moral policing of the body. Malagatti's description of the subsequent physical scuffles, after which the women "dive into the water and emerge looking as if they had been cleansed after a dip in the river Ganga" (Malagatti 28), emphasizes the performative and symbolic dimension of these interactions: the act of bathing functions as both a literal cleansing and a subtle reclaiming of dignity in the face of casteist humiliation. Malagatti transforms the everyday activity of washing clothes into a site of social critique, exposing how caste hierarchies operate in micro-spaces of everyday life while simultaneously demonstrating Dalit agency and collective endurance.

Aravind Malagatti's autobiography reconstructs Dalit subjectivity and reclaims cultural memory from the margins of Indian society. Through a nuanced analysis of *Government Brahmana*, this paper has revealed how Dalit autobiographical writing functions not merely as a mode of self-expression but as an act of socio-political intervention and cultural resistance. Malagatti's narrative traverses the personal and the collective, merging lived experience with historical consciousness to articulate a distinctly Dalit epistemology that challenges the normative frameworks of caste and cultural hierarchy. At the core of Malagatti's text lies a powerful critique of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste orthodoxy that continue to shape the contours of Indian modernity. His recollection of humiliation, exclusion, and systemic othering exposes the enduring presence of untouchability in the social fabric, even in postcolonial and supposedly democratic India. *Government Brahmana* itself operates as an ironic subversion—it reflects the paradox of the Dalit's position in modern India: empowered by constitutional rights and reservations yet still trapped in the symbolic violence of caste consciousness. This duality encapsulates the fractured nature of Dalit identity, where modernity and tradition coexist in tension and where social mobility often evokes resentment from the privileged classes. By voicing the silenced, Malagatti turns autobiography into a political discourse, where personal suffering is transmuted into collective assertion. His narrative, thus, performs the dual function of remembering trauma and reconstructing dignity. Moreover, the study situates *Government Brahmana* within the larger corpus of Dalit autobiographies that include the works of Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Sharan Kumar Limbale. Together, these texts reconstruct an alternative historiography of the nation—one that foregrounds the Dalit experience as central to understanding India's sociocultural evolution. Malagatti's work contributes significantly to this corpus by incorporating regional specificities of Karnataka's caste practices, linguistic identity, and cultural ethos. His language—raw, vernacular, and assertive—rejects the Sanskritized tone of mainstream literature, thereby democratizing the literary space. The autobiography transcends the boundaries of individual memory to function as a collective archive of Dalit resistance and resilience. It disrupts dominant narratives of nation and modernity by inserting them in the silenced histories of the oppressed. Through this process of cultural reconstruction, Malagatti redefines the idea of selfhood and belonging, offering an alternative vision of social justice rooted in equality and human dignity.

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