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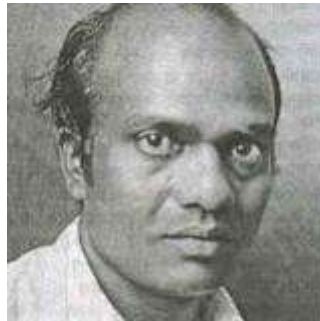
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Questioning the Motherhood in *Mother*: Dalit Identity against the Emotions of a Dalit Woman

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Baburao Bagul (1930-2008)

Abstract

The Constitution and laws in India prohibit untouchability. But Dalits still have no better alternative than to perform the traditional occupations, considered to be menial and lowly, in many places. Migration and the obscurity of urban environment have in some

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cases resulted in upward occupational mobility among Dalits. Dalits are still marginalized and despite many movements and ongoing struggles, their position in overall society has not changed much.

The present paper tries to depict this reality portrayed by Baburao Bagul, a pioneer of Marathi Dalit Literature, in his short story *Mother*. Particularly, the writer of this article wishes to focus on the character of the Dalit women who are ill-treated not by the society at large but also by their own family.

Horrrifying Treatment Meted Out to the Dalits

I was born in a Brahmin family and I was raised as a Brahmin. I always had a question in mind why my mother used to keep separate glasses for the people who were coming to our apartment to clean the area and remove the rubbish, which was definitely scattered and thrown around by the people living in the apartment itself. The lady, who used to come to my place during those hot summer days, would ask for drinking water. She was a lady of my mother's age and my mother used to respect her as she believed from the very beginning that 'these' people are actually worth respect and value. But as a child, I could never imagine the social discrimination those people were subjected to at that time. I am talking about Gujarat, a state well-known for its hospitality and frank nature. As I grew up, I slowly began to notice this horrible situation. The problem of the treatment of the Dalits would continue to agitate the minds of every person with ethical and moral values. Moreover, the problem of Dalit women is more horrrifying as they are from the marginalized among marginalized persons.

The Lot of Women

Women, from the very beginning, were left at the margin. They had to pass a very hard life in their houses without opening their mouths to argue or to revolt. They tried their level best to fight this situation and they came out of it – at least on paper – we have good records of women revolting and struggling hard - to get things done on their own terms - with the society at large. But the Dalit women are kept under the marginalized ranks since they are the ones with no chances of getting out of that situation at all. Majority of the women of the older generation is illiterate and suppressed because of their family conditions. They seem to be completely unaware of why they suffer from these problems. Here, in this paper, I wish to talk about such a woman who sacrificed her whole life for her only child – a son, who in the end, revolted against her screaming that she was a

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‘slut’, a ‘whore’. After losing her husband, she dedicated her life just to provide bread and butter to the son, so he can be nourished well as he would be the only support for her later in life when she was old and needy. The short story, *Mother*, is thus a description of the ideology of a woman of a slum area and the society she lived in.

***Mother* by Baburao Bagul**

Mother by Baburao Bagul is the depiction of the fierce battle for life in an urban slum. The story revolves around a young, lower-caste Dalit widow and her son Pandu, who face harsh realities of life day after day. Their life is turned into turmoil because their relationship is spoiled when the upper caste people exploit the innocence of the child by poisoning his mind against his own mother. Their struggle to survive is so intense that there is no time for better understanding between the mother and the child. The story shows the pain and loss the mother experiences throughout her life – first her husband, then her unfulfilled wishes tearing her up for a long time and at last the pangs of despair given to her by her son.

The Constitution and laws in India prohibit untouchability. But the Dalits still have no better alternative than to perform the traditional occupations, considered to be menial and lowly, in many places. These are also the source of income for the illiterate among them. Migration and the anonymity of urban environment have in some cases resulted in upward occupational mobility among Dalits. The majority of them still continue to perform their traditional practices. Still the practice of untouchability is prevalent in most of the rural areas where the Dalit faces discrimination at the hands of dominant castes.

The present paper tries to depict this reality portrayed by Baburao Bagul, a pioneer of Marathi Dalit Literature, in his short story *Mother*.

Translations of Dalit Works

With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages to English, Dalit literature is poised to acquire a National and International presence. The Dalit literature, though written in different languages, in different geographical backgrounds, portrays common themes: the suffering, discrimination, exploitation and injustice:

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Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective 'Dalit is dignified' thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order.¹

The Motive of Dalit Literature

The motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits, and portrayal of their struggles against casteist traditions. These writers make use of the language of the so-called outcastes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are part of Dalit literature. Because of the age-old oppression, the expressions of the Dalit writers have become sharp and focused.

Baburao Bagul

Baburao Bagul was one of those Indian writers who are known as Dalit writers, as he tries to point out in his novels and short stories the divisive nature of the Hindu society. A pioneer of Marathi Dalit literature, he was influenced by the works of Karl Marx, Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Baburao Bagul generally depicts men and women who are uneducated and lacking in any kind of sophistication. He portrays the stark reality of life and brings out the woes and miseries and economic inequality, which are the basis of his experience. His writings deal with the individuals who are the victims of the social system in which casteism is a dominant factor.

The Depiction of Urban Slum

Mother by Baburao Bagul is the depiction of life in an urban slum. The story revolves around a young, lower-caste Dalit widow and her son Pandu, who face many harsh realities of life. The story tells the suffering of a mother.



The story starts with the children in a school where the teacher is teaching a poem which is about a mother. The children are carried away by the soothing and melodious voice of the teacher, which reminds them of the warmth of their mother's lap, her love and care. The poem transports them to a land where only love and joy exist. Pandu starts thinking of his mother as 'Vatsalya Sindhu', which was a river of motherly love and benediction. He realizes her greatness, the love and the care she gives him and the sacrifices she made for him. But he is soon transported back from his dreamland when one of his class mates begins to call Pandu bad names, abusing his mother. The Dalit children are always the target of the mischief for the upper caste children. Dalit children sometimes have to face discrimination and even untouchability in school. Pandu is told that his mother is having a relation with the overseer and she sleeps with him. Everyone around him calls his mother a slut. His young mind starts thinking that he has to face humiliation because of the acts of his mother and he is enraged:

Pandu's face burned with shame and anger. He felt a demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murder them all in cold blood. It was good to think them lying together in a pool of blood. It was short-lived joy, however. He remembered that he was an orphan, now that his father was dead, and his mother an unprotected widow. He was afraid that Dagdu, their neighbour, would pick fight with his mother, try to strip her sari....Rage gave way to infinite helplessness and he felt spent. (Ramakrishna 2005: 217)

His father was dead and his mother an unprotected widow, so his neighbour Dagdu would always try to molest and rape his mother. After coming back home Pandu realizes that he had not had his meals and on finding out nothing to eat he starts crying. When

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nobody turns up, he realizes that his mother is quite changed these days as she doesn't come home early and has stopped caressing him. Even after returning home she spends most of her time in caressing herself, pampering her own beauty, her clothes, and the new silver chain around her neck. As Pandu remembers her actions, he is fearful and suspects her, believing the overseer maybe her lover. Still, he doesn't cry because if he starts crying, the neighbouring women would come and start abusing his mother.

The Widow

Being a poor helpless and above all an untouchable widow, is a curse. People start abusing and pointing fingers at her for every single act. A woman has her own share of universal suffering as all other women, and the fact of being a Dalit woman adds more social, religious and cultural exploitation to the list.

Pandu's neighbour Dagdu comes to his place and starts abusing his mother calling her a whore, describing his desire for her:

The whore of a slut! You're shameless enough to make the rounds
of the shops with that pimp, with your child sitting alone at home!
If that was what you needed you only had to tell me-I'd have
obliged. And here I've been burning with desire for you, all these
years....But now....³(*Mother*)

Pandu is scared, but when Dagdu, jealous and lustful, insults his mother, Pandu loses his childlike feelings and the murderous fire continue haunting him and he feels like hurling a heavy rock at Dagdu. He is full of anger and hatred but he thinks disdainfully that whatever Dagdu has told is right.

The child begins to suspect her more, and along with fear, contempt and anger, slowly take form in his mind against his mother. The burden of all such thoughts is so heavy and depressing that Pandu could not suppress his tears and starts crying, screaming and throwing himself on the ground. The neighbouring women, who come to show him sympathy, start abusing his mother, turning his suspicions into reality. When Pandu's mother comes home and sees her neighbours at her doorstep with her son, she is sure that they must have turned even her son against her. At that moment she recalls her cruel, drunken, and deceitful husband whose image she sees on Pandu's face. This cruel image intensifies her anger just when she is now feeling secure in her newfound love.

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With the newfound knowledge about his mother from his neighbours Pandu starts observing changes in his mother: her tightly worn expensive sari, the careless confidence, the defiance in her walk, her lips redder. He is now convinced of her guilt.

The suspicion in Pandu's eyes, constantly remind her of her TB-ridden, suspicious, nagging husband, because of whom she had undergone extreme physical and mental torture. She feels she could even wish to murder her son too when she recognizes in his eyes the same dark suspicion she has seen earlier in the eyes of his father. The memory of the days, when her husband was alive, makes her restless. She remembers the days when she used to work at the construction site, hauling bricks and cement. She was beautiful and so her husband kept on thinking that she might have sold her beauty. He kept on scrutinizing her body. Without any reason he would look for clues to prove that she was committing adultery. He even wished her to lose a lot of blood, become lame or deformed, ugly and, therefore, despite his ebbing strength he would hit her, aiming at her face, her nose, head, and eyes. He even threatened to kill her when she was asleep. He blamed her for all his misfortune and held her responsible for his estrangement from his brother for he had looked at her with lust in his eyes. He was so merciless that one day when she suddenly woke up she found him heating up the iron in fire to brand her body with the hot iron. He didn't accept her proposal to return to their village. After his death men were drawn to her but she refused to accept their proposals. They tried to rape her, and then other women waged a war against her.

But, when she realizes that Pandu is vulnerable and is totally dependent on her, she asks him about his health. But Pandu, unable to cope up with the love she bestowed upon him after so many months, refuses to answer. He is so furious that he refuses to accept the new clothes she has brought for him. The clothes remind him of the last Diwali, when on wearing the new clothes brought by his mother the neighbours jeered at him, abusing his mother that she must have done a great business getting many a rupee from each customer:

‘Good for you!’ They jeered at him. Your mother’s business seems to be doing very well. What a great rush there must be. Five rupee for each customer.⁴ (*Mother*)

Dagdu had almost succeeded in removing her clothes and Pandu had thrown a stone on his mother's tormentor. Ever since he had stopped wearing new clothes and now when he sees the clothes brought by his mother, only anger arises in him. The memory of all the

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abuses and the embarrassment makes him feel more disgusted towards his mother, and he runs out of the house, calling her a whore. His mother is deeply hurt to hear it from his mouth. Since the death of her husband, all those years she had lived the life of a widow though she was proposed to by many men who were wealthy and could have provided her everything for a happy life. But she sacrificed her happiness for Pandu, hoping that when he grows up he would support her and her sufferings would come to an end. She had spent ten long years as a widow and had tried so hard to love Pandu. She had lived only for him till the overseer came along last year. Ever since she lost her husband, she has given her all for him, and now this son has turned against her. She starts crying helplessly.

Betrayed by Everyone

She feels betrayed by everyone, her husband, her son and the men around her. She locks the door of her home, afraid that Dagdu would come to molest her and waits silently for her son to return. After some time she thinks that, Pandu may not return forever, watching the locked door. At that moment, the barking of the street dogs makes her think that surely her son has returned and she happily opens the door. But instead of Pandu, she finds the overseer standing there. The overseer hugs her and her unfulfilled desires of ten years make her respond to him. She is so overwhelmed by it that she does not even hear her son's timid knock and cry for her. Pandu, heartbroken, runs out of the house. When she realizes this she tries to go out to stop her son from going, but the overseer does not let her go. She tries desperately to get free but like a person stuck in a quagmire, she finds release impossible. The story ends thus on a note of despair and helplessness in the life of a subjugated, illiterate Dalit woman.

Truthful Reflection

Social exclusion, lack of effective legal protection and socio, economic and cultural exploitation has kept the Dalits at sub-human living conditions for centuries. Nowadays, many among the younger generation are able to make better lives for themselves, through education and job reservation provided by the Constitution of India. Baburao Bagul portrays the harsh realities of life in an uneducated Dalit widow's life. He shows the struggles of women in his works. His stories show the external as well as internal conflict faced by the Dalit women. Bagul portrays the fall as well as the rise of women characters and depicts them as their own selves truthfully.

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