



Understanding Dalit Women: A Reading of Baburao Bagul's 'Mother'

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Abstract

The Indian caste system, for centuries, has subjected the Dalits to oppression and deprivation. Although Dalit men are time and again victimized by the society, the condition of the Dalit woman is worse. The Dalit women bear a triple burden of discrimination. Their marginalization is threefold due to race, gender and caste. In my paper, I aim to question and analyze the multi-faceted oppressions the Dalit women face. I attempt to explore the condition of Dalit women in the society vis-à-vis the short story 'Mother' by Baburao Bagul. The protagonist of this short story is a widowed Dalit woman. Hence, the subjection of a Dalit widow in Dalit society and the constitution of her motherhood is the mainstay of my paper. Eventually, the question of emancipation of the Dalit women is also taken into account.

Keywords: Dalit women; Dalit literature; widowhood; motherhood; feminism; subaltern.

I. Introduction

Rama then went out in search of the ‘deviant’ sudra who did not stick to his avowed occupation of serving the higher varnas and finally found an ascetic performing a great penance in the northern part of his realm. Rama then addressed him thus: ‘I am Rama, the son of Dasharatha. Out of curiosity I ask you this question: tell me truthfully in which cast you have been born.’ Shambuka the sudra said quite truthfully, ‘O king, I am born of the sudra caste. I want to attain divinity by such penance.’ As soon as the ascetic said these words Rama drew forth his sword and cut off Shambuka’s head, and as soon as he did so the Gods uttered praise of Rama and offered him a boon. Rama asked that the brahmana boy should be restored to life and it was thus that the dead brahmana boy came back to life: he had been restored to life the moment Shambuka the sudra ascetic was killed – merely for seeking divinity like the brahmanas. (Chakravarti 25)

The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: “what comes by birth and can’t be cast off by dying—that is caste.” (Pawde 183)

For centuries, the Dalits have been at the bottom of India’s social pyramid and are even denied the most basic of human rights such as drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, and freedom to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth. Although Dalit men are discriminated against by the society, the condition of the Dalit woman is worse. Woman, even the high caste ones are perpetually treated as ‘other’ in the society. They are subjugated and often face violence. But the violence that these Dalit women encounter is multi-faceted. Verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual assault, rape, and forced prostitution are examples of abuses Dalit women face at the hand of men belonging to dominant

castes. Unfortunately, Dalit women also experience violence beginning at their own homes. Family norms are another means of oppression and committing violence against these women. The Dalit male goes out and get thrashed everywhere and he asserts his masculine power on the Dalit woman, probably because the society has deprived him of everything except the right to domestic tyranny.

Surprisingly, it is not only their male counterparts and the high caste men who assert their patriarchal power on the Dalit women, but they are also alienated and kept aloof by the high caste women. The mainstream Indian womens' movement continues to be led by privileged dominant caste, upper-class, urban feminists. But why is this discrimination and resent towards the Dalit women? The answer to this lies in the distilled impact of centuries-long alienation generated by both – the ingrained patriarchal and Brahminical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, invisibility and structural and domestic violence which is the everyday experience of Dalit women. Uma Chakravarty summarizes this in a nutshell in her book *Gendering Caste*:

The Women's movement was also critiqued by dalit feminists for not paying attention to the specific and more extreme forms of oppression experienced by dalit women who bore a triple burden: as dalits from the upper castes, as labourers from the landlords, and as women from men of their own families and caste. (Chakravarty 4)

II. The Literature of Dalit vis-à-vis the Traditional Literature

If Dalit literature appears to be propagandist, it is because it presents the Dalit writers' anguish and their questions....Dalit writers cannot sever their relationships with pain...the questions they pose in their work are their own, and those of their society...intense lived and felt experiences cannot be called propagandist. (Limbale 34)

Like the caste based discrimination meted out to the Dalits, the literature of them also has a stigma attached to it, that it is the literature of the oppressed. And it always stood in sharp distinction with the traditional literature. Such distinction had often led to the repudiation of Dalit literature on the basis of being resentful, propagandist, univocal and monotonous. But if the literature of the Dalit has garnered a negative value amongst the prominent literary critics (traditional critics) it is because that it has always turned its table on mainstream literary values.

All of the Dalit writings depict the burning suffering of the Dalit male and female. The writings of the Dalits have focused on both fiction and non-fiction alike in the form of autobiographies, short stories, novel and poetry. However, it will be a mistake to assume that the fictions undertaken by the Dalit writers do not resort to the reality and are imaginative in nature. Rather, the fictions of the Dalit writers are also manifestation of the suffering that the Dalits face every day in life. They are naked representations of the realistic experiences which attempt to hit the readers hard with dire reality. Baburao Bagul's short story 'Mother' is no exception in this case. This short story offers unequivocally and sometimes in language and expression scoffed at by traditional literature (Brahminical literature), the plight of a poor widow Dalit woman. In my paper I attempt to put forward an analysis of the character of this widow, who is also a mother. I would also like to pose questions such as: how a Dalit widow is treated in the society she belongs to? How is her widowhood different from a Hindu upper caste woman's? Is her motherhood also different from an upper caste Hindu woman? Can her voice be heard? Is there any emancipation at all possible for her?

III. 'Mother': The Ordeal of a Dalit Widowed Mother

Baburao Bagul's short story 'Mother' mainly touches upon the issue of a Dalit widow being exploited not only in the hands of her high caste overseer, but also in the hands of her own husband and the society. The final blow comes when she is misunderstood even by her own son. For a man to assert his patriarchy, he has to brand the woman he possesses. This procedure of patriarchal domination comes instinctively to all men irrespective of their caste. The case is no different with Pandu's father, the husband of the mother in the short story. Being diagnosed with Tuberculosis, Pandu's father had no other option than letting his wife go outside to seek a job. He blamed her entirely for his disease, his joblessness and his failing strength. He would shower verbal abuses on her and accuse her of being a 'slut' (Bagul 214). Her only sin was venturing into the public domain (the domain inhabited by men) to keep her household from falling apart. She would further be greeted by her husband with comments such as "your sari looks as if you've worn it in a hurry, your hair's coming loose, where were you, slut?" (Bagul 214) Furthermore, he would assert his rights of being a husband over her and "would strip her and examine her feet, her thighs, her breasts, her sari and blouse, and would carefully scrutinize her lips and cheeks" (Bagul 214).

With her husband's death, it seems at first that Pandu's mother is now liberated. But such relief is short lived as the situation changes to the worse. Until now, Pandu's mother has been exploited by her husband in her private domain- her home, but now she has become an object of enjoyment to every male, from her overseer to her neighbor Dagdu. The latter would often scoff at Pandu saying "your mother's "business" seems to be doing very well" (Bagul 216). The widowhood of Pandu's mother seems strange compared to the widowhood a Hindu upper caste woman would go through. But one should take into notice that the predicament of the Dalit widows is very different from the Hindu ones. An imposition of willed chastity undertaken by a Hindu upper caste widow makes her connected to her husband in a transcendental way even after his death. This act of being connected to her husband through her soul has always been successful to restrict the life of a Hindu upper caste widow to the household. The rules and regulations set out for Hindu widows goes back to *Manusmriti*, where the eponymous author laid out specific rules for the Hindu society to function. The division and discrimination of caste system is also said to have its foundation in *Manusmriti*. Reena Patel aptly quotes from *Manusmriti* regarding the rules that an upper caste Hindu widow is supposed to follow in her book *Hindu Women's Property Rights in Rural India: Law, Labour and Culture in Action*:

Let her rather emaciate her body by living upon pure flowers, roots and fruits, but let her not, when her husband is dead, even to pronounce the name of another man...let her live a life of austerity, strictly observing the rules of continence, and foregoing all sensual pleasures until she dies. (Patel 84)

These rules have come into existence in ancient India, but are yet an intrinsic part of the society. The upper caste widow is situated in the domain of her house, where she perpetrates almost a ritualistic performance – a *Sanyas* within it. But the Dalit widows are devoured by the men who often satiate their sexual hunger by exploiting them. And these men belong to both the upper caste community and her own kin. The mothers, grandmothers or daughters of the Dalits had not sold their bodies to appease their lust; rather they sold it for the sake of hunger. Sharankumar Limbale's experience regarding his mother subscribes to this practice of the Dalit society that at the same time uses and abuses their women. In *Outcaste*, Limbale narrates how his mother had to succumb to different men in order to survive:

To be born beautiful among dalits is a curse...Masamai was beautiful and she suffered for it. She was divorced by her husband, after which Hanmanta enjoyed her and then deserted her...how long would she go on being a woman without a man? People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. (Limbale 37-38)

The case is similar for Pandu's mother too. To her horror, her own son Pandu slowly started detesting her who had merely been a victim of circumstances. The first instance of his hatred towards his mother appeared when the teacher in his school was reciting a poem about a mother, who was a *Vatsalya Sindhu* (a river of benediction and motherly love). This depiction of mother by teacher lies in lieu with the traditional notion of motherhood. The traditional notion of motherhood is constituted around the upper caste women. The mother is supposed to remain in the private domain and her primary role is that of the nurturer of her children. She is to shower all her love and affection on them and the existence of a woman in the society is seen in relation to her ability to produce children with motherhood being her ultimate aim. As Chitra Sinha writes in her essay *Images of Motherhood: The Hindu Code Bill Discourse in India* "The identity of motherhood thus completely overshadowed all other identities of Indian women and as a

result, the Indian woman was raised in a culture that trained her to be an ideal mother from early childhood.” (Sinha 21)

A Dalit woman might not conform to the Brahminical ideals of motherhood according to the society which still thrives on casteism, but is her love and affection different from an upper caste mother? Can there be any discrimination in love of a mother? The answer is no. But in the case of Pandu’s mother, her motherhood takes a different turn with Pandu’s hatred for his mother. The first instance of this hatred appears in school, where Pandu’s teacher was reciting a poem about a mother, a *Vatsalya Sindhu* – a river of benediction and motherly love. Remembering her mother, initially a ‘benign smile’ (Bagul, 209) lit up Pandu’s face and for a moment he forgot how he had always been subjected to venomous attacks and mischief regarding the character of his mother. His reverie broke very soon when one of his classmates yelled “don’t touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says Pandu’s mother sleeps with the mukadam” (Bagul 210). The very society that exploits Pandu’s mother is successful to rip apart Pandu’s innocence and gradually severs the bond between him and his mother. Pandu started contemplating and scrutinizing his mother’s behavior, in a way similar to his deceased father:

Last night I waited for her return for such a long time, but she didn’t come on time. She was so, so late; and when she did come she didn’t say a word to me, never kissed me once...wasn’t it the same in the morning?...She played with the new silver chain around her neck. (Bagul 211)

As Pandu started remembering her actions one by one his slow suspicion soon gave birth to undying rage and hatred. Without understanding the role and intervention of society to victimize his mother, he started to take after his father. His mother's desperate pleas to wear the 'new clothes' and to 'forgive her' (Bagul, 216) could not melt his heart. Finally all her hopes were shattered when Pandu screamed "Whore! I spit on your clothes" (Bagul 216) and ran. This reminds us of Pandu's father's attempt to brand her as a 'slut'. While she was waiting desperately for her only son to return, the room door flew open and she found that the overseer stood there. In the pretense of consoling her, he tried to caress her breasts and arms. Pandu's mother slowly let her suppressed hunger overtake her and just then Pandu returned home and saw them tightly embraced. And with that Pandu's last hopes of his mother not being a 'whore' or a 'slut' seemed to crash. It was too late for Pandu's mother too. Though she tried desperately to free herself from the tight grip of the overseer, but "like a person stuck fast in a quagmire, she found release impossible" (Bagul 218). The ending that Bagul offers to his readers is symbolic of the eternal oppression that the dalit women face and from where their release is indeed impossible.

IV. Conclusion: Is Emancipation Ever Possible?

My husband's hands were groping all over my body...however, these were being done to me against my wishes. (Pawar 154)

I used to hand over my salary to my mother; now I started handling it over to my husband. If this is not like deliberately offering head for the butcher's knife, what else is it? (Pawar 175)

The concept and the ending of this short story might seem tragic and probably even distanced from reality, but this is actually the predicament of Dalit women in India. It is not the Dalit

female's willful selection to sustain a living like this, but this is rather the position they are coerced into by society. Their subjection is three fold due to race, caste and gender. This is clearly manifested in the words of Ruth Manorama, a Dalit feminist. In an interview with Meena Kandasamy, she highlights the precarious situation of the Dalit women:

I was influenced by the black women's movement in America...why were they separate? Then, I understood the racist notions of purity and pollution that operates there. Just like our situation the black women don't have a leadership in the mainstream women's movement. ("On Caste and Patriarchy")

And

Meena: and how was the response from our men...

Ruth: (laughs) oh, they just branded me a feminist...they asked me, "is there not equality in our community?" I said, "yes, there is equality. If there is real equality, both our men and women should get drunk. But what kind of equality is it when you alone get drunk and beat your women?" then I had more questions to ask, "in our society, why are we not promoting the education of women? Why are we not giving our women equality of opportunity?"...I was with [Ram Vilas] Paswan in the Dalit sena. I asked him "where are the Dalit women in the Dalit sena?" ("On Caste and Patriarchy")

The terrible condition of Dalit women cannot be uplifted until their own men start acknowledging the importance of the Dalit women. The first and foremost struggle that a Dalit woman faces is within the boundaries of her own family. Even it is difficult for an educated Dalit man to accept the emancipation of Dalit women. He wants her to be solely confined to the household works. Taking cues from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' we can say that these Dalit women are still treated as the 'subalterns' who cannot speak. (Spivak 104) But is it right to say that no Dalit woman ever attempted to speak or protest against the atrocities? Can we reframe Spivak's claim? Can it be said that the subalterns

try to speak, but they are not heard? Spivak argues in a similar vein in an interview with Dona Landry and Gerald Maclean. She elucidates what she actually meant when she said that subaltern cannot speak. She proposes that the problems arise if one takes this ‘speak’ absolutely literally as ‘talk.’ She finally makes it clear by saying that when she said that ‘the subaltern cannot speak,’ she implied that even when the subaltern ‘makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act’. (“Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors”) This holds true for the Dalit women too. Their voices are deliberately silenced. Their emancipation seems only possible when they will be able to break the familial shackles and revolt against the very society they are a part of.

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