

The Agony of a Subaltern Mother: An Intersectional Study of Baburao Bagul's *Mother*

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the complex interplay of suffering and resistance embodied by the subaltern mother in Baburao Bagul's short story *Mother*. Positioned at the intersection of caste, class, and gender, the subaltern mother in *Mother* endures profound hardships that are emblematic of the broader struggles faced by marginalized communities in India. Through a close reading of the text, this study investigates how Bagul portrays the angst of a subaltern mother not merely as a passive act of endurance but as a form of silent resistance against the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. The analysis focuses on the duality of the mother's role, highlighting how her suffering, though deeply personal and physical, transcends individual pain to become a collective symbol of resistance. The paper argues that Bagul uses the subaltern mother to critique the socio-political system that perpetuates her suffering while simultaneously offering a nuanced portrayal of her resilience and agency. By situating the maternal figure within the broader context of Dalit literature and subaltern studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature serves as a powerful medium for articulating the voices of the oppressed.

Keywords: Agony, Intersectional, complex interplay, patriarchy

Introduction

Subaltern studies found their origin in the ideas propagated by Antonio Gramsci. During the 1980s, critics focussed on the need to re-claim the long-lost history of the subjugated people. The focus was on bringing forth “the agony, tortured mentally, bodily injury” (Ponselvi J, 2018) endured by these communities. The newer form of narrative stressed the need for an insider perspective on the subaltern

community and thus stressed the need to write history based on individual and personal levels. The innumerable caste, classes, and religions often cause the process of 'otherization', pushing certain sections of the society into the margins. The theme of suffering and resistance acts as an important thematic concern in these areas of literary study. The isolation and uncertainty among subaltern communities pushes them into the nexus of poverty and unemployment. This hinders their chance of social upliftment and silences their voice at a wider scale. Subalternity in India holds prominence due to the diversity of our cultural identity. Major proponents of the field include Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Baburao Bagul, a celebrated Marathi author known for his short stories, is a worthy literary figure. He holds prominence due to his hard-hitting narratives. Baburao Bagul comments that religious literature mostly talks about the two castes, namely Brahmin and Kshatriya, and thus, relegates another narrative (Satyanarayana, 2019). His works give an insider's perspective on the ill-treatment meted out to subalterns by the upper class. His narratives also became a mouthpiece to dismantle the growing belief promoted by Savarna about the total eradication of caste violence and discrimination. The works of Bagul showcase the rural hinterland reeling under the constant threat of institutionalized casteism. The passion to represent the agony of the subaltern, which represents his own reality, is a striking feature of his narrative. His first work itself was able to stir a storm due to the portrayal of characters in a social setup that was enamored with caste and class-based politics.

Baburao Bagul's short story *Mother* is a poignant tale that ably depicts the bond between a mother and her son, Pandu, who is her only family. The central character is a mother who is devoid of any name throughout the narrative, making her identity solely dependent on being a mother. Her subaltern identity is maximized due to her lack of characteristics outside the sphere of motherhood, making agony all the more devastating. The story depicts the herculean task of a post-independent Indian woman who is constantly judged under the continuous glare of a highly patriarchal society. The question of double marginalization is raised through Bagul's narrative, which tends to question the prevailing thought process in the most hard-hitting manner.

The story begins in Pandu's classroom with the topic of the eternal love of a mother, which is symbolized by a river of love. However, this tender moment is ripped away from the readers when they get to know about the real-life travesty of Pandu and his mother. Pandu's mother is the sole breadwinner of their family of three,

as his father, being diagnosed with tuberculosis, is either bedridden or remains doubting his wife's character. The unsatisfactory familial relationship with her husband is a matter of added agony to Pandu's mother's life. The constant physical abuse meted out by the ailing father due to his concern regarding infidelity is a way to fill the void of his incompetence. The constant attempt to disfigure the woman is a way through which he can satisfy his ego. However, the woman resists the attempt to harm her. The bitterness in the relationship is further depicted through the woman's ignorance of her husband's death, which happens later in the story. She asserts her identity by demanding her 'conjugal rights' and using the power at her disposal to aggravate the pain and thus exact her revenge. The story is also representative of Pandu's dilemma of agreeing with the world's perspective of his mother or his own understanding of her. The mother continues to work day and night to feed her baby boy, even among the men who cast eyes similar to vultures and bloodthirsty hounds. Even after rejecting a proposal for a better life, her sacrifices are shattered when she hears Pandu's words, "whore I spit on your clothes" (Bagul 216). The story ends with a struggling mother's unheard plea for her son, who has been brainwashed by the patriarchal agency into believing that his mother has failed and thus can't understand the essence of motherhood. The continuous repercussions meted out to the unnamed mother which is reflective of the predicament that is to occur in the life of lower-class women. *Mother* is a prime example of a woman placed against the oppressive forces of caste, class, and gender-based prejudices and who refuses to be bogged down by them at any cost.

Agony of a Subaltern Mother

The discourse revolving around the suffering of a subaltern mother begins with a focus on the nature of how the oppression is meted out to her in this story. This helps us to understand the intersectional experiences of the character, which further amplifies the idea that oppression is not analogous and has innate differences.

Baburao Bagul, through his work, shares the continuous struggle of being a woman along with being associated with the Dalit community in his short story *Mother*. The protagonist represents the oppressive nature of the patriarchal setup that preys on the individual woman by setting up gender binaries, creating the concept of a good and a bad mother to haunt the doubly marginalized subaltern women. The mother of Pandu faces extreme disrespect for making sure she provides for her only child. She continuously kills her desire to fit the mold of being a pious widow, only to fail when her only child becomes the reason for her biggest mental oppression.

While the nature of oppression is not overtly physical, the continuous moral policing and hypocrisy of the patriarchy act as a reason for the downfall.

Bagul's protagonist is not named and thus becomes a symbolic representation of every Dalit woman subjected to the extremities of the world due to her gender, caste, and class. Sunaina Arya, in her work, argues that caste and gender go hand in hand in the South Asian context, and that has severely impacted the position of Dalit women as they find regular opposition even in the feminist circle, which adulterated with Savarna feminism, which fails to recognize the intersectional life of subaltern women around the world (Arya, 2020).

In *Mother*, the pain is utterly emotional as well as physical. This is why the intersectionality of their experiences becomes an integral part of the oppression. *Mother* depicts the subaltern woman who continues to work hard to make sure her son Pandu does not have to toil and can acquire an education. However, the existing system made it particularly difficult due to her positioning as a widowed Shudra woman. Society continues to insinuate her lack of purity and leaves no chance for the character to assassinate her in front of her son, Pandu. The young child is too young to imbibe the fact that his mother has sacrificed her life in his rearing and is easily molded by the ideologies of patriarchal society to believe that his mother is rightly blamed as the 'fallen woman.'

The unnamed mother is a symbol of the present-day women who face suppression due to their gender and their caste identities. Furthermore, Baburao Bagul does not shy away from representing the desire of a woman who has lived most of her life in a loveless marriage with a man who tries to hide his insecurity by questioning the character of his own wife. Pandu's mind is corrupted by the flawed order around him as he slowly and steadily starts believing the darkness in his life is due to his mother. Her plight is all the more horrible due to the constant trail of unwavering men around her who were trying to get hold of her liberated self. It is important to point out that *Mother's* decision to continuously struggle is due to her desire to be a 'good mother' to Pandu. And thus, it is the idea of motherhood that leads her to face the horrors of the patriarchal society.

Although the narrative might hint towards the failure in making her son believe the purity of her intentions, it can definitely not be brushed under the carpet to incorporate the Marxist understanding of our society as well as with respect to the theme of oppression. The poem 'Vatsalya Sindhu', which screams the right ways of a

mother's love, is crafted by those in power, implying and understating the role of a mother. It reflects the idea that being a mother is constructed for how a woman from the upper class must behave. Such an understanding of motherhood messed up Pandu's view of a good mother. He tries to fit his mother in the position of Vatsalya Sindhu but only feels that she has failed as a mother. The feeling of 'otherness' is created due to his inability to categorize himself into mainstream society, which ultimately acts as a reason for hatred against his own mother.

The intersectional experience of Pandu's Mother holds the uttermost significance, and that is why one needs to look at the experiences of the subaltern characters. It is highly inappropriate to invalidate the truth of those at the margins of society so as to make way for a classified and homogeneous experience of suffering. The problem arises due to this reformist idea of liberalism as the impetus is laid on the portrayal of the Dalit woman as a pitiful lot who has given away the scope to rise from the continuous subduing and oppression. However, the biggest travesty of the short story's narrative is the fact that Mother's biggest heartbreak is done to her by her own son, for whom she has tried to kill every ounce of her internal desire. Pandu's words, "whore! I spit on your clothes" (216), could be taken as an ultimate attack on Mother's trail to uplift herself by winning back the innocent love of her child. That Pandu calls his mother a whore could be used as an example of ingrained misogyny that has pushed the relationship between a mother and her son to a point beyond repair. Here, Baburao Bagul presents the various forces that bring to life the perilous ideas that maintain the system in favor of patriarchal pursuit. In addition to physical oppression and discrimination, Subaltern women face certain psychological challenges as a result of the intersections of gender and caste (Pal 2015).

Resistance of Mother

While the tale of suppression is an important element of the narratives dealing with the literary voices of the subaltern, it is also important to stress how they try to win back their agency from their oppressors and thus make a statement of their true power of resistance.

In his short story, *Mother*, the protagonist is an unnamed Dalit woman who has to ward off the lecherous men in her life to lead a life of respect for herself and her son, Pandu. While a lot of criticism is directed against the unnamed narrator of the tale, it still acts as a way to symbolize the similar oppression faced by numerous Dalit women striving hard to meet their ends. Although Pandu is not able to identify and stand in solidarity with the continuous struggle of his mother to give him a better life due to patriarchal notions and ideologies, we do find a fair bit of instances of self-

assertiveness on the part of Pandu's mother. While Mother is continuously being harassed by her husband as he believes she has an extramarital affair, he blames her for infidelity when all her energies are spent on providing for her family due to the unfortunate condition of her 'better half.' However, she is able to avenge herself when she chooses not to be sympathetic towards him during the last days of his life, thus leading to his demise. She continues to forge ways to ensure a steady flow of income to support the growing needs of her family. Moreover, she tries to resist the comforting shoulders of the overseer to ensure Pandu does not fall into the belief promulgated by the entire society. Her identity as a Dalit woman brings to the forefront the traumatic conditions of a woman pushed to the margins by the continuous cycle of oppression, emerging from caste, class, and gender, and still trying to find a reason to survive not only for herself but also for the ones she considers her own.

Conclusion

Baburao Bagul skilfully portrays the subaltern mother as a multifaceted character whose suffering and sacrifices go beyond endurance to become quiet acts of struggle against the repressive forces of patriarchy and caste. Bagul criticizes the socio-political systems that support her suffering while simultaneously emphasizing her agency and strength through a nuanced portrayal of her dual function as a victim of systemic injustices and as a symbol of resiliency. This research emphasizes how crucial intersectional analysis is to comprehending how literature, such as Bagul's, functions as a potent vehicle for expressing the struggles and resistance of marginalized populations. In the end, the lowly mother is not only a victim of her situation but also a ray of hope and defiance for people who face comparable struggles.

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