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## Positioning of Dalit Women as Others: A Study of Baburao Bagul's Story *Prisoner of Darkness*

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**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to prove the marginalized status of Dalit women whom the society looks down as others. In the story *Prisoner of Darkness* the writer Baburao Bagul focuses on the plight of the character named Banoo- a Murali (Devdasi) who is treated as others and denied acceptance in the mainstream of society due to their lower caste status. He brings to the front the ugliness of caste system which makes the upper caste absolutely oblivious to the sufferings of the lower caste by treating them as others. Murali or Devdasi system (called by many other names in many states of India) is institutionalized exploitation of Dalit women, the lower class of untouchables who are forced to prostitution in the name of religious practice while going through the process of denial and otherness in the society.

Key words: Dalit women, devdasi, murali, marginalized, otherness, caste system.

The short story collection *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (1963)* is considered as not only Baburao Bagul's magnum opus but a book that exemplifies the shift in aesthetically portraying the stories of those who had never been the part of the imagination of upper caste writers. The book has been translated from Marathi to English by Jerry Pinto and published as *When I Hid My Caste* in 2018.

Bagul masters the art of storytelling and his characters are real people leading a desperate quest for humaneness in a society with well established inhumane caste prejudices causing inequality and injustice. Hasan (2010) correctly points out that 'Social inequality revolves around the axis of class, caste, tribal status, religion and gender.' Even after decades, Bagul's stories are still relevant in context of the people at the margins for whom state of affairs has unfortunately not changed much. Through the sheer candor of his prose, Bagul forces the unjust society to delve deep into their conscience and to take into consideration the struggles of underprivileged and unacknowledged outcasts.

Bagul effectively portrays the pain of treatment as others and the atrocities of upper caste Indian society on a Dalit. Being a progressive writer he tells not just the tale of a Dalit man but he also depicts the double marginalization of Dalit women vividly. He keenly observes and empathizes with the oppression and violence which lower caste women go through. In the words of Arifa Banu:

He is among the enlightened writers who authentically depict the ordeals faced by women in a patriarchal and caste ridden society. The intersectional feminist strain in the stories of Baburao Bagul might often seem as a matter of epiphany for upper-class feminists who would tend to miss out on the aspect of class and caste when it comes to feminist politics.

Dalit Literature has tried to incorporate the voices of Dalits but it is equally important to include the voices and experiences of Dalit women as well. The struggles and life of Dalit women are even more complicated. They occupy a slightly different space. They are the marginalized among an already marginalized class. A Dalit woman is a Dalit among the Dalits. The dual oppressive forces of caste and gender work simultaneous to create an intensity of oppression which becomes unbearable for a Dalit woman. (Das)

There are critics who argue that it is one thing to address the issues of the marginalized, but it is another to centre the women's movement on issues affecting the most marginalized of the women (Rege, 2000, p.493). Through Bagul's stories *Prisoner of Darkness, Streetwalker, Competition, Pesuk, Monkey and Mother* we get to see the caste imposed and gendered discrimination where a Dalit woman is objectified by the husband and treated as the other and inferior by the society.

In the story *Prisoner of Darkness* Bagul focuses on the plight of the character named Banoo- a Murali (Devdasi) along with her son who are treated as others and denied acceptance in the mainstream of society due to their lower caste status even though she is married to an upper caste man. By using expressionist language Bagul reaches out with compassion to Banoo and his son, both victims of the social circumstances. He brings to the front the ugliness of caste system which makes the upper caste absolutely oblivious to the sufferings of the lower caste by treating them as others.

The story starts with departing sun and the fall of darkness. In a melancholy tenor the body of Ramrao Deshmukh is ablaze on his funeral pyre. With every passing moment the darkness keeps growing and it imprisons the mind, body and soul of Devram. In the light of funeral pyre the frenzied rage gushes out from every pore of the body of Devram, the son of departed Deshmukh. 'Devram punched the air with a fist as powerful as a hammer. He gnashed his teeth and between sobs, he shouted, "Banoo! You..."' (Bagul, (2018), p.1). He is convinced that his father died because of Banoo. He holds her responsible for everything bad which has happened in Deshmukh's household. He could never accept her as his mother for she belonged to lower caste. Devram thinks that she put a spell on Deshmukh and spoiled him. She made him dance to the tune of her songs for twenty years and even killed his mother. Everyone hated Banoo but also feared her for she was supposed to be a witch.

Devram wanted to avenge the death of his father. He heads home to murder Banoo. His desire for revenge rages on and keeps growing every second. He wanted to pierce her heart with bullets. 'A desire that had been held in check for twenty years by his fears of his father, was now in full flame' (Bagul, (2018), p.2). It is quite unusual that even while hell-bent on revenge he could imagine her 'voluptuous, beautiful, tender young back...silky black hair and shake her senseless' (Bagul, (2018), p.2). Bagul has tried to put focus on the beauty of Banoo which even Devram, her step-son desired to enjoy.

The funeral followers left the pyre ablaze and followed Devram. They believed that Banoo has cast some spell on him with the help of some black magic. All of them were afraid on seeing this condition of Devram and they mumbled and muttered the name of Banoo. 'Everyone was sure that she was an evil spirit who had taken a beautiful human form' (Bagul, (2018), p.3). Bagul has taken lengths to express the hatred others felt for Banoo. She was a lower caste woman who according to them with the help of her black magic has ruined the Deshmukh family. The venom they felt for Banoo spewed out in the form of violent and inhuman words.

One of the villager remarks: 'Bring that demon here. Let's strip her naked and take her procession through the village' (Bagul, (2018), p.5). Satva Sonar, Police Patil, Kulkarni and everyone else there wanted to burn her alive, but most importantly 'all agog to see Banoo's beauty' (Bagul, (2018), p.5). They all believed that she has driven Devram mad. According to them she even has driven her own son Daulat mad. Sudama says, 'He's restless, like a wind, never stopping, wandering here, there and everywhere' (Bagul, (2018), p.6). Daulat picks fight with everyone. But the truth is he is being picked by everyone and called names for being a bastard son of Ramrao Deshmukh. But being a son of Murali, a prostitute or a keep of Ramrao he does not enjoy any respect. He is also supposed to be an outcaste like his mother. The hatred people felt for Banoo found outburst on Daulat and all he could do is pick fights.

Latest incident of Daulat's fighting was with the widow of a Brahmin. He went to Pandu Devgarh's widow and asked for some water. Being a lower caste person he was denied any water and he started fighting with her as well. Sudama finds this episode a fault of Banoo. He rails against Banoo and says, 'That prostitute has ruined everything. Tomorrow every Mang, Mahar and Chamar is going to turn up at a Brahmin's house and ask for water. The whore has soiled all notions of caste and creed' (Bagul, (2018), p.6).

Banoo has been mahar by her caste. Even though married to upper caste influential man named Ramrao Deshmukh her status could not rise and neither her son Daulat is accepted as an equal by Devram or anyone else. Devram enters the wada (house) shouting and intent on killing her with his gun. Banoo unaware of his intentions was drowned in her sorrow of the death of her husband, old Ramrao. At this juncture in the story Bagul affirms his sympathetic attitude towards Banoo and we start to know about Banoo's side of the story. There were many assumptions which people had about her. Main issue of the hatred towards her was her being a lower caste woman ruling the Deshmukh Wada. Society cannot accept such blunders. Devram, Her step son shuns her from calling him her son. He shamelessly and inhumanly remarks: 'I am a Deshmukh. I am not the son of some streetwalker, some shameless low-caste woman, some murali. Prostitutes don't have sons; they only have bastards...' (Bagul, (2018), p.9).

The sense of otherness is apparent in Devram's attitude towards Banoo. Devram could not accept her as his mother because of her lower caste and he also makes clear the position of Daulat as bastard. First he wanted to kill her and avenge the death of his mother and father but on seeing her beauty-all he can think of is enjoying her body. He says to Banoo: 'Don't call me son. I won't let you go...Instead of roaming the streets, whipping your handkerchief around and singing, stay here, be my keep...' (Bagul, (2018), p.9).

Banoo somehow freeing herself from Devram's clutch runs out to save herself. In the past twenty years she never descended the stairs of Deshmukh house. People had never seen her in person. They only talked about her 'terrifying beauty' (Bagul, (2018), p.11). Today they stood in the lanes and watched her run. On seeing her someone in the crowd exclaimed 'Hot Stuff!' Although they never knew her but the poison of their hatred for her start flowing out in the form of insulting remarks. For them she was a murali and a keep of Ramrao Deshmukh. Banoo in order to protect herself from Devram has come out of the house. But world outside was even more vicious. No one knew her side of the truth and every mouth had a different version of her as a murali, a prostitute, a witch and an object of lust.

On seeing Banoo- one of the villager comments: 'Devram must have had his way with her and left her like that. Someone like me would have known how to use her as a wife should be used...' (Bagul, (2018), p.11). A wife for these narrow minded people means an object to be used. Since Banoo is not a wife so she is not even supposed to be a lady or woman. 'She is a demoness and we should all get some of her' (Bagul, (2018), p.11).

The attitude of the villagers is completely hostile towards her. To protect herself from the scorn and curses of the villagers she seeks help of her son Daulat. But Daulat hated her so much that he won't even look at her or come to her rescue. An old woman continues with the curses and calls her 'Slut, whore... You drove your son mad because of the sin of his birth. When you got pregnant again, you thought your husband might stray and so you had an abortion. Now bear the fruit of your sins' (Bagul, (2018), p.12). Banoo is hurt by the insolent remarks and her heart desired to express the sorrow of her life. But people are not interested in her story. They all have been throwing all the menace of their own lives and viciousness of stonehearted perception of Banoo being a lower caste woman enjoying the privileges she was not supposed to have. Her lower caste stature could not be erased or forgotten even after her marrying to an upper caste person.

Now Banoo's husband is dead so everyone smitten by her beauty and out of revenge wanted to have their own way with her. There was no shame in doing so. Men of the village feel it justified to rape or shame her because she is a murali. The meaning of murali is 'a girl child who is dedicated to a God or Goddess....But this route is generally taken when the family is too poor to provide for the girl child. Many muralis live in penury and are often exploited by various men' (Bagul, (2018), p.4). Call them Murali, devadasi, Jogini, basavi, jogati, nati or many other names in different states of India, but the truth of life is same for all of them. They are all outcasts (others) and Banoo in the story 'Prisoner of Darkness' has same plight as that of any other murali or devadasi.

Bagul empathizes with her situation and narrates her story to us. She was the daughter of a poor untouchable. Her family being poor turned her into a murali and she was left in the temple. Many men smitten by her beauty offered money to her father. Her father was afraid that she might be in danger of being turned into a prostitute and being inducted into some brothel. In order to protect her finally he accepted the offer of Ramrao Deshmukh.

Devadasi system is not only exploitation of women, it is the institutionalized exploitation of women; it is the exploitation of Dalits, the lower class of untouchables; it is the religious sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived women; It is the glorification of humiliation of women. Inherent in this system is the fascistic belief that a certain section of human population, the lower caste, is meant to serve the 'higher caste's superior men. (Zaidi, 2011)

'Poverty and "Untouchability" contribute to the persistence of this terrible practice (Sinha).' A report commissioned by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India reveals the shocking reality of how thousands of Dalit women continue to be forced into the Devadasi system in several states of India. More than half of the Devadasies become prostitutes (Zaidi, 2011). Zaidi (2011) further states:

A Devadasi, in a way, is considered "public property" in the village. Devadasies who do not become prostitutes struggle to survive as agricultural labourers or maidservants. Muralis also known as Devadasies in other parts of India are not allowed to marry, as they were supposedly married to the temple. She 'serves' the priests and inmates of the temple, and the Zamindars (local land lords) and other men of money and power, in the town and village. The 'service' (read sexual satisfaction) given to these men is considered akin to service of God. The Devadasi is dedicated to the service of the temple Deity for life and there is no escape for her. If she wants to escape, the society will not accept her.

Banoo like any other murali or devadasi had to go through this process of denial and otherness. In order to save herself from the world she became Ramrao Deshmukh's wife but in truth she was just his keep and had always been conscious enough not to offend him in any way and be the object of his lust at any cost. 'In order that he might not lose interest in her and turn her out of doors- where she would have to be wife to ten different men at the same time, satiating each one's lust-she danced to Ramrao's tune. But she also made him dance to hers' (Bagul, (2018), p.14). But in the process she paid no attention to baby Daulat and on Ramrao's orders she tied her tubes to prevent other babies from coming to the world. In order to save herself from the vicious world outside, she turned herself into the object of powerful lust of Ramrao. No one knew her side of story. She never came out of the house of Ramrao in past twenty years. Rather than sympathizing with her condition they accused her of all that went wrong at Deshmukh house. They felt contempt for her and they even feared her. She is supposed to know black magic with which she controlled Ramrao and according to them now for money she had driven Devram mad.

For the major part of the narrative Maruti temple is in the background. People standing inside and around the temple are insensitive and violent towards Banoo. For them she is a murali who should serve them. Today was their chance to grab her and have their way with her. A temple is a place to shred all ill thoughts but here in the story the temple of the celibate God Maruti is made impure by the sickening lust of the upper caste men without any shame or conscience.

Kashinath, one of the villagers comes out of the Maruti temple and tries to grab Banoo. On seeing this other men of the village also start chasing her. Not even a single woman in the village thought of saving Banoo or says something in her favor. They all hated her. One villager in the crowd calls out: 'Kashya, tear off her sari. The low-born woman thought she could become the Deshmukh's wife. Get her...' (Bagul, (2018), p.15).The contempt and feeling of otherness for a lower caste woman, a 'Murali' is clear in the above lines Zaidi (2011). makes an apt comment on the hypocrisy of the hollow Hindu caste society.

It is interesting to note that the untouchables belong to the Dalit community and are lower caste Hindus, though, otherwise are not allowed to drink water from the same well as the rest of the higher caste people of the village. They cannot eat from the same plate or sit in the same place as upper caste people. They work mostly as night-soil cleaners. When it comes to sex they are not only 'touchable' but are actually forced into sex by the higher caste Hindus and practices such as the Devadasi system are invented to facilitate and perpetuate their exploitation.

At last it is only Daulat, her son who comes to rescue Banoo from the crowd. He attacks Kashinath with his dagger. On seeing Daulat, Banoo is overwhelmed with motherly love. She tries to get closer to him but he refuses her touch and love. Now she could apprehend the reason of his madness and hatred for her. In past twenty years she never once has been a real mother to him. While too much busy appeasing her husband, Daulat got neglected and now she realizes her failure as a mother. Now began to see each of the blood-soaked secrets he had concealed. She as a mother was responsible for subjecting him to the evil atmosphere of the house and the tradition-encrusted village. "... from childhood the constant pecking at him, the constant cawing and croaking to which he had been subjected, had all conspired to drive him mad. The insults had warped his mind. The contempt had sealed his mouth. And enduring all this had turned him violent (Bagul, (2018), p.13)."

Daulat does not enjoy the same status as Devram, his half-brother. He is as much an outcast as his mother. Devram blatantly makes his moves on Banoo. He without any conscience and human dignity drags and pushes Banoo down in front of Daulat. Banoo and Daulat both are his family but the caste hatred and his lust has blinded him to the extent that he is ready to rape his step- mother in front of his step-brother and the whole village. Daulat saves the honor of his mother by stabbing Devram but the villagers attack him and kill him ruthlessly.

As she bore the ignominy and shame-as she would to the end of her life- Banoo slipped her arm out from under Devram's body and struggled to get the knife out Daulat's fist. Her blouse was in tatters: Her sari, clenched between her teeth, was torn. A curtain of black hair flowed past her shoulders. And her hand struggled to free the knife from Daulat's grasp. There was blood everywhere (Bagul, (2018), p.18).

Bagul's compassionate portrayal of Banoo makes us feel the pain of violence inflicted by the society while snatching all the rights of her living a normal happy life and securing the same for her son. He succeeds in depicting the powerlessness of Banoo and how she is being positioned as 'other'. The death of Ramrao Deshmukh results into Banoo's furthermore marginalization as a Dalit widow who now becomes triply marginalized. The sorry plight of a widow has aptly been portrayed by Bagul in one of his remarkable story 'Mother'. In the similar context Das (2015) observes, 'The final image of a woman caught in an inescapable hold symbolically shows the predicament of all Dalit women who find themselves caught in the tyrannical hold of both the male patriarchy and the caste system'.

The story 'Prisoner of Darkness' is a groundbreaking portrayal of casteism, discrimination and the challenges faced by a Murali or Devadasi with the sense of otherness. It's a fitting observation by Banu (2021) that:

Baburao Bagul's stories are a constant reminder of the atrocities carried out on women and the marginalised. The stories spur the readers' conscience to reflect upon the society we live in. Baburao Bagul wove his stories keeping in mind the intersections of caste, gender, and class. His collection of stories called *When I Hid My Caste (Jevha Mi Jat Chorali)* 1963 is an important contribution to modern Marathi literature. For his subject matter, instead of dealing with just class in isolation, Bagul's focus is more on caste and gender and the double marginalisation that people suffer on account of it. The Dalit author wrote about the marginalised downtrodden section of society and exposes the world of systemic oppression.

Through every word in the story, Bagul's compassion reaches out for Banoo, the kept woman as well as her son Daulat 'who despises her for being what she is- both victims of social circumstances' (Bagul, (2018), p. XI). Gokhale in the introduction to the book *When I Hid my Caste* observes:

The best Dalit writing, and Bagul's is up there in the vanguard, does not articulate its commitment to this social cause simplistically-that would make it propaganda-but is a profoundly felt response to the complexity of the socio-cultural forces that have shaped the world. Bagul's stories place characters in the very eye of this social storm in order to follow their inevitable hurtling towards ends which are often tragic but occasionally also triumphant. Placed thus, the characters are neither black nor white, certainly not perverse, but purely and simply human (Bagul, (2018), p. XI).

Women like Banoo whom society brands as muralis or devadasies are stigmatized for their whole life and are on the extreme margins of the society. Baburao Bagul exposes the on-ground reality of the systemic oppression faced by these women. Banu (2021) observes, 'The literary scene of late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian short stories was revolutionized by Bagul through such female characters that belong to the lowest rungs of society. He broke away from the tradition of writing which saw the division between poor and rich as only economical, and brought to fore how oppression is related to caste as well as gender. His works have been pivotal in ensuring the marginalized sections a space in literature, especially the downtrodden women who suffer in both public and private spheres'. His stories along with *Prisoner of Darkness* successfully portray the sorrows and troubles of Dalit women due to the social exclusion and positioning as others.

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