



## VIDROHA, VEDANA, NAKAR: THE TRINITY OF RESISTANCE IN BABURAO BAGUL'S WHEN I HID MY CASTE STORIES

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### ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the articulation of subaltern consciousness in Baburao Bagul's short story collection *When I Hid My Caste Stories*, a foundational text in Dalit literature. Through a close analysis of ten selected stories, the research investigates how Bagul formulates a distinctive Dalit literary aesthetic grounded in the intersecting themes of *vidroha* (revolt), *vedana* (pain), and *nakar* (dissent). These thematic vectors constitute the foundational grammar of Dalit expression, encapsulating both personal and collective experiences of caste-based marginalization existence in modern India. Moving beyond a mere documentation of systemic oppression, Bagul's narratives delve into the psychological, social, and existential dimensions of Dalit life. They reveal the complex interplay of caste discrimination, economic marginalization, gender subjugation, and cultural erasure, while simultaneously foregrounding Dalit resistance, agency, and evolving identity. Bagul's literary strategies transform individual trauma into a universal humanistic discourse centred on dignity and survival. The analysis is informed by a theoretical framework that combines subaltern studies, intersectionality, and Dalit literary criticism. This study argues that Bagul's work not only occupies a foundational place in Indian literature, but also offers a powerful model for the aesthetics of subaltern representation and protest within modern Indian literary discourse.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “Subaltern” encapsulates the tragedy inherent in the past, present and future of the human condition. It represents an unavoidable facet of human relationships, experienced by populations across the world. No society appears exempt from either producing a subaltern class or participating in subalternation within its own structures. While scholars have popularized the term within post-colonial studies, as a “lived-reality,” it has long been an accepted often unquestioned part of existence for countless ‘subaltern’ communities across the globe (Spivak 71). Though complex, the term can, for the sake of clarity, be defined with recourse to A Handbook of Literary Terms by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham: “Subaltern is a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse; ‘subaltern’ is a British term for someone of inferior military rank, and combines the Latin terms for ‘under’ (sub) and ‘other’ (alter)” (Abrams and Harpham 238).

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist intellectual, coined the term subaltern to refer to populations that were treated as the ‘other,’ the ‘alter’ who were not allowed to occupy positions of power within a cultural

hegemony (Gramsci 54). While his Marxist leanings have led some to argue that the term was intended exclusively for the proletariats (i.e. the working class), it is undeniable that the power relations arising from the economic structures of any state play a crucial role in determining who defines the centre-margin paradigm in that society. It is typically the economically and intellectually empowered classes that constitute the centre and construct the socio-cultural framework in ways that systematically exclude those who do not conform to their criteria of being “cultured” and “civilized” (Chakrabarty 15). This comprehensive research paper presents an extensive examination of the oppressive socio-cultural framework that has shaped the Indian society for centuries, specifically in the form of the caste system.

In the Indian context, the word “subaltern” has not merely denoted the coloniser-colonised dichotomy but an indigenous phenomenon of oppression that was faced by a section of Indian populace formally classified as the ‘Dalits’ at the hands of the so-called upper caste Indians (Guru and Sarukkai 28). This study undertakes a detailed analysis of Baburao Bagul’s short story collection *When I Hid My Caste Stories*, a foundational work in the canon of Dalit literature. Bagul’s work stands as one of the most powerful articulations of subaltern consciousness in modern Indian writing. The collection, originally published in Marathi as *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* in 1963, created a veritable storm that knocked readers off their feet by the sheer elemental force of the stories (Pinto 6). More importantly, Bagul liberated younger Dalit writers from the shackles of literary Marathi, giving them freedom to write in their own tongues, even if readers weaned on the preponderantly romantic literature of upper-caste Marathi writers found these new voices difficult to stomach.

Baburao Bagul’s work enforces themes identified as *vidroha* (revolt), *vedana* (pain), and *nakar* (dissent) (Bagul 42). His stories are a “profoundly felt response to the complexity of the socio-cultural forces” that have shaped the world of the Dalit experience. The stories in this collection have a touch of authenticity to them because they are the lived realities penned down by the author (Gokhale 11). The expressions that are potent with the note of dissent would not find exact equivalents in the translated versions. Nevertheless, it would not be a futile exercise to understand the essence and tone of the writings that says a lot about the Dalit experience and their position within the broader framework of Indian society (Limbale 153).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

### Historical Context and Literary Background

Baburao Ramji Bagul was born on 17 July 1931 in Vihitgaon, Nashik District, Maharashtra, in a desperately poor Dalit family. At ten years old, he was sent to live with his maternal aunt in Mumbai, where he went to the local municipal school from which he matriculated. After that there was no education for him. He did odd jobs to pull his weight in the family until he found a permanent job in the railways (Bagul 13). Bagul’s aunt lived in the Matunga Labour Camp, a complex constructed by the Bombay Municipal Corporation for Dalit labour from the hinterland. The buildings were dingy, the land marshy and infested with mosquitoes. Large families lived in cramped single rooms with little or no ventilation. This environment of deprivation and struggle provided the crucible for Bagul’s literary consciousness.

There were two great fires blazing in those squalid environs, putting spunk and spirit into the young residents of the camp—Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s Scheduled Caste Federation office and the Communist Party’s study circles. Together they kept the camp buzzing with intellectual activity (Pinto 8). Bagul drew his strength from both. Marx gave the worker in him an idea of his worth. Ambedkar showed him, as a Dalit, who his enemy was. Their double influence is evident throughout his literary work, particularly in the title story of the present collection. The emergence of Dalit literature in modern India can be traced back to the 1960s, propelled by illuminating concepts that elucidated the essence of Dalit consciousness (Nimariya 230). Before a Dalit writer even embarked on the courageous path of penning down their vivid collection of experiences, they were already imbued with the weight of over two hundred years of tumultuous history.

Dr. Ambedkar had called upon Dalits to educate, agitate, and organize. The three imperatives that drove Dalit literature were *vidroha* (revolt), *vedana* (pain), and *nakar* (dissent). These three concepts form the theoretical backbone of Bagul’s literary project and provide the framework for understanding his contribution to subaltern literature (Bagul 25). *Vidroha* (Revolt) represents the active resistance against systemic oppression, manifested both in physical confrontation and intellectual rebellion against the ideological foundations of caste hierarchy. *Vedana* (Pain) encompasses not merely physical suffering but the psychological and spiritual anguish of marginalization, the internalized trauma of generations of humiliation. *Nakar* (Dissent) involves the rejection of dominant cultural narratives and the assertion of alternative values and worldviews that challenge hegemonic structures.

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily from Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" and the subsequent development of subaltern studies by scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. Gramsci's understanding of how dominant groups maintain power not merely through coercion but through the creation of consent provides a crucial framework for understanding how caste hierarchy perpetuates itself in Indian society (Gramsci 78). The concept of the 'subaltern,' as developed by Gramsci and later elaborated by postcolonial theorists, offers a lens through which to examine the ways in which marginalized communities both resist and are constrained by dominant cultural narratives.

Spivak's seminal question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" remains central to understanding the politics of representation in Dalit literature (Spivak 66). Her critique of the ways in which subaltern voices are mediated through elite discourse provides important context for examining how Bagul's stories function as acts of self-representation rather than representation by others. The development of Dalit literary theory, particularly as articulated by critics like Sharankumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle, provides additional theoretical grounding for understanding the specific aesthetic and political dimensions of Dalit literary expression.

Contemporary scholarship on Dalit literature has increasingly emphasized the importance of intersectional analysis, recognizing that caste oppression intersects with other forms of marginalization including gender, class, and regional identity (Rege 45). The work of Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru has been particularly influential in developing theoretical frameworks that account for the multiple dimensions of Dalit women's experience. Their emphasis on the need for "Dalit standpoint theory" provides important context for understanding how Bagul's stories function as epistemological interventions that challenge dominant ways of knowing and being.

#### When I Hid My Caste - The Central Dilemma of Identity

The title story of the collection provides perhaps the most powerful articulation of the dilemma of identity faced by educated Dalits in modern India. The protagonist's assertion upon being asked his caste reveals the complex negotiation between asserting individual merit and confronting systemic prejudice. The protagonist's passionate declaration demonstrates his attempt to transcend caste identity through nationalist rhetoric and urban cosmopolitanism:

I roared like a thunderclap on hearing this: 'Why do you ask me my caste? Can you not see who I am? Me, I am a Mumbaikar. I fight the good fight. I give my life in the defence of the right. I have freed India from bondage and I am now her strength. Got that? Or should I go over it again? Do you want it in verse?' (Bagul 87)

This response reveals multiple layers of resistance strategy—the appeal to national identity, the assertion of individual agency, the claim to urban citizenship, and the rhetorical flourish that demonstrates intellectual capacity. Yet the ultimate failure of this strategy is revealed in the story's devastating conclusion, where after being beaten for concealing his identity, the protagonist realizes: "When was I beaten by them? It was Manu who thrashed me. Come, Kashinath..." (Bagul 89). This reference to Manu, the ancient lawgiver whose code legitimized the caste hierarchy, transforms a personal assault into a historical and systemic one. The protagonist's recognition that his beating comes not from individual prejudice but from millennia of institutionalized oppression represents one of the most profound insights in Dalit literature about the nature of systemic violence.

The narrative technique employed here is particularly significant. Bagul moves from the protagonist's confident, almost arrogant assertion of identity through nationalist and modernist discourse to the final moment of recognition where historical and contemporary violence merge. This structural movement from confidence to recognition mirrors the broader trajectory of many educated Dalits who attempt to escape their caste identity only to be brutally reminded of its inescapability. Recent scholarship has noted how this story anticipates contemporary discussions about "passing" and identity performance in marginalized communities (Singh 33).

#### "Revolt" - The Intellectual and Physical Dimensions of Vidroha

The story "Revolt" provides a visceral exploration of the theme of vidroha through the character of Jai, an educated Dalit youth forced to confront the reality of his limited social mobility when offered degrading work as a sanitation worker. The story captures the intellectual agony of the educated subaltern who understands the philosophical implications of his degradation:

'What kind of evil nation was this that any man should ask another to do such hateful work for money? And what kind of people would accept that it was their lot in life to do such work? How could they be willing to do this to make ends meet? Mankind, who has named everything in the world, who has created the Gods and the dharma, who has conjured up creation out of nothingness. Mankind...greater than all the five elements and more powerful. Man does this work...Why? Why? What demon does he fear? What terrible draught must he drink?' (Bagul 45)

This passage reveals Bagul's sophisticated understanding of the relationship between consciousness and material conditions. Jai's questions are not merely personal complaints but philosophical inquiries into the nature of human dignity and social organization. The repetitive structure of the questions ("Why? Why?") emphasizes the urgency and desperation of the intellectual seeking to understand the systematic nature of his oppression. The contrast between Jai's intellectual capacity and his social position creates a profound tension that Bagul explores throughout the story.

This intellectual rage contrasts sharply with the physical humiliation Jai faces moments later, described with characteristic Bagulian intensity:

Then he began to understand why his eyes had grown heavy, where his pain had come from. His brain was thrashing about like a fish thrown on burning sand, his veins seemed ready to burst open and were beating against his forehead and the back of his head, and it seemed as if someone had shoved a churn into his stomach and was rolling it about again and again and the nerves of his stomach seemed ready to rip their way out of his mouth. He closed his lips firmly. (Bagul 47).

The physicality of this description—the brain as a fish on burning sand, the churning stomach, the bursting veins—demonstrates Bagul's technique of embodying abstract concepts in concrete, sensory experience. The revolt is not merely intellectual but visceral, involving the entire body in its rejection of degradation.

#### **"Prisoner of Darkness"- Sexual Exploitation and Intersectional Marginalization**

The story "Prisoner of Darkness" explores the themes of sexual exploitation and double-marginalisation among low-caste women through the character of Banoo, a Mahar woman kept as a murali by the high-caste Ramrao Deshmukh. The story provides one of the most complex and nuanced explorations of how caste, gender, and class intersect to create multiple layers of oppression. The villagers' reaction to Banoo's situation reveals the intersection of caste prejudice and patriarchal violence. When Ramrao dies and his son Devram threatens Banoo, the villagers' response demonstrates systematic violence against Dalit women:

'Bring that demon here. Let's strip her naked and take her in procession through the village,' said Kanhuji Patil. 'No, let's strip her naked and tie her up like a bull and whip her and lead her by the nose to the pyre,' said Satva Sonar, in a fine fury. . . And I'll also be able to say she committed sati,' the Police Patil said, all agog to see Banoo's beauty. (Bagul 63)

This passage reveals the systematic nature of violence against Dalit women. The suggested punishments—public stripping, procession through the village, being led "by the nose to the pyre"—are specifically designed to humiliate and dehumanize. The reference to sati is particularly significant, as it shows how upper-caste men appropriate even religious practices to justify their violence against lower-caste women. Contemporary feminist scholarship has noted how this story anticipates current discussions about intersectionality and the specific vulnerabilities of women who occupy multiple marginalized identities (Kandasamy 78).

Bagul's presentation of Banoo's internal justification reveals the impossible social constraints placed upon poor Dalit women:

She was the daughter of a poor Untouchable. When she was dedicated to Khandoba, her name had been changed to Banoo and she had been left in the temple. Many men from all walks of life, driven mad by her beauty, had begun to visit her father, carrying money. He tried to protect her from turning into the wife of ten different men at the same time or being inducted into a brothel. (Bagul 65)

This passage illuminates the economic coercion underlying what might superficially appear as sexual immorality. Bagul reveals instead the survival strategies of women trapped within intersecting systems of caste and patriarchal oppression.

#### **"Bohada"- Cultural Resistance and Religious Challenge**

The story "Bohada" represents the purest articulation of nakar (dissent) against the socio-cultural framework that restricts Dalits to the periphery. The protagonist Damu's demand to perform a religious masque traditionally reserved for upper castes creates a direct challenge to religious hierarchy:

'I, DAMU, The village Mahar, demand that we have a sÅng, and that too a Narasimha sÅng!' This announcement caused the village to reel in shock. The peace of the village began to stagger around as if it had been bitten by a scorpion. The brilliant red statue of Lord Maruti took on a wrathful aspect, the glass lantern went silent, and at the village square, and beyond it, words began to gather and cluck.' (Bagul 23)

The metaphorical language here is particularly rich. The village's peace staggers "as if it had been bitten by a scorpion," suggesting that Damu's demand is perceived as poisonous to the social order. The statue of Maruti taking on a "wrathful aspect" indicates how even religious symbols are imagined to participate in the maintenance of caste hierarchy. The village's response demonstrates how economic power reinforces the center-margin paradigm:

'Damu,' Ganpatrao Patil said now, rubbing his nose with his fingers. Alerted to a new development, the crowd moved forward. Waving a finger adorned with a golden ring, the Patil said, 'You should get the sÅng.' And turning a meaningful eye on the crowd—to remind them of the negotiations that had taken place earlier that afternoon to bypass the Collector's instructions—he added, 'But it will cost two hundred rupees.' (Bagul 25)

This strategic use of financial barriers to maintain social exclusion exemplifies the mechanisms by which economic and social power intersect to perpetuate marginalization. The reference to "the Collector's instructions" suggests that legal equality exists at the administrative level but is subverted through economic means at the local level. Recent scholarship has emphasized how this story demonstrates the persistence of caste hierarchy even within formally democratic institutions (Raj 49).

### **"Streetwalker"- Maternal Desperation and Survival**

The story "Streetwalker" examines the themes of poverty and deprivation of necessities through Girja, whose resort to sex work is driven by maternal desperation rather than moral failure. Bagul focuses on her "universal aspect" as a desperate mother, transcending judgmental representations of sex work:

'Her docile body, racked by terrible pain, pushed to the extremes of endurance, came back to life, such was the effect of the rage she felt. Her upper lip peeled back to her nose and became a straight line. In her muscles, strength began to gather. Her eyes filled with the rage of the serpent. Her face grew red with anger. She dragged the blanket into a makeshift covering and burst out: 'You pimp, where do you think you're off to? Drop that money!' (Bagul 56)

This transformation from docility to rage demonstrates Bagul's understanding of how extreme circumstances can activate survival instincts that transcend social conditioning. The physical description—the lip "peeled back," the muscles gathering strength, the "rage of the serpent"—animalizes Girja's response while simultaneously dignifying it through the context of maternal protection. The story's tragic conclusion confirms the ultimate futility of her struggle: "The owner of the restaurant had lied to her. Her son had died. He was dead" (Bagul 58). This ending underscores how the broader theme of systemic poverty makes even the most desperate efforts at survival ultimately meaningless.

### **Additional Stories - Expanding the Spectrum of Subaltern Experience**

The remaining stories in the collection— "Pesuk," "Gangster," "Sacrifice," "Monkey," and "Dassehra"—expand the thematic and geographical scope of Bagul's exploration of subaltern experience. "Pesuk" provides one of the most complex explorations of how revolutionary consciousness develops in response to historical and contemporary oppression through the character of Kaka, an aging freedom fighter. The story gradually reveals a more complex narrative about the nature of oppression and resistance, connecting individual violence to broader patterns of systematic oppression.

"Gangster" explores themes of urban alienation and ethnic identity through an Ethiopian protagonist who has been exploited and marginalized in Indian society. This story demonstrates Bagul's understanding that subaltern status transcends specific cultural contexts, revealing universal dimensions of oppression and resistance.

"Sacrifice" and "Monkey" explore additional dimensions of the subaltern experience, including the ways in which competitive dynamics are used to maintain hierarchical structures and how concepts of sacrifice are manipulated to justify continuing oppression.

"Dassehra" examines how religious festivals and cultural celebrations become sites for the reproduction of caste hierarchy, revealing how even supposedly universal cultural practices are structured to maintain social divisions.

### **Stylistic Analysis and Contemporary Relevance**

Bagul's literary technique deserves particular attention for its innovative approach to representing subaltern experience. His writing maintains a consistently powerful and visceral tone while dealing with emotionally charged subject matter. The stories employ a rich symbolic framework that connects individual experiences to broader historical and mythological contexts. The reference to Manu in the title story, the transformation of Savitri into a "pesuk," the religious masque in "Bohada"—all of these serve to locate contemporary Dalit experience within larger narratives of power and resistance (Patil 15).

The use of animal imagery is particularly significant throughout the collection. Characters are described as having "bull-like heads," moving like "dark boulders," exhibiting the "rage of the serpent." This animalization serves multiple purposes: it suggests the dehumanizing effects of oppression while simultaneously invoking the power and wildness that enables survival and resistance. Bagul's sentences twist and turn through aggressive clauses or come at readers like battering rams in short, blunt strokes (Pinto 12). He is a mix of Gothic poet and expressionist painter, creating an intensely experienced world where dawn breaks open the hard plateau of darkness with a crowbar to let out the sun, where the shadow of a tree tries to run away, angry with the earth, but the earth will not let it escape.

The contemporary relevance of Bagul's work cannot be overstated. Recent scholarship has emphasized that his stories continue to resonate with ongoing struggles for caste equality in modern India. The collection's emphasis on the intersection of caste with other forms of marginalization anticipates contemporary discussions of intersectionality by several decades (Soundararajan 92). The stories' exploration of urban alienation and the failure of modernization to eliminate caste discrimination remains painfully relevant in contemporary India, where caste-based violence and discrimination persist despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Academic reception of Bagul's work has evolved significantly since its initial publication. Early critics, particularly those from upper-caste backgrounds, often focused on the "disturbing" or "perverse" aspects of his characters without understanding the systematic nature of the oppression he documented (Kawthekar 156). More recent criticism, influenced by subaltern studies and Dalit feminist theory, has recognized the sophisticated theoretical framework underlying Bagul's narratives and their contribution to understanding intersectional oppression. The work continues to influence contemporary Dalit writers across Indian languages. Authors such as Meena Kandasamy, Yashica Dutt, and Sujatha Gidla have acknowledged Bagul's influence on their exploration of caste, identity, and resistance. The themes he established—particularly the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression—continue to resonate in contemporary Dalit writing, which has expanded to include voices from different regions, languages, and social positions within Dalit communities.

Bagul's work gains additional significance when placed in the context of global literature of resistance and marginalization. Scholars have noted important connections between Dalit literature and African-American literature, both in terms of thematic content and literary technique (Limbale 184). The Dalit Panther movement in India was explicitly inspired by the Black Panther Party in America, suggesting common strategies of resistance across different contexts of racialized oppression. What emerges as particularly significant in Bagul's work is the exploration of different responses to oppression that parallels other traditions of resistance literature. Some characters choose to rebel against atrocities, others accept inequality as legitimate, and still others attempt various forms of accommodation or transcendence. This range of responses reflects the genuine complexity of lived experience under conditions of systematic marginalization while avoiding both romantic idealization of resistance and fatalistic acceptance of oppression.

The comparison with African-American literary traditions is particularly illuminating. The acceptance of the superiority of dominant groups that Bagul documents in some characters echoes what Nobel prize-winning African-American writer Toni Morrison described in her Foreword to *The Bluest Eye*: "Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident" (Morrison ix). This psychological dimension of oppression—the internalization of dominant group narratives about marginalized communities—represents one of the most sophisticated aspects of Bagu's literary analysis.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste Stories* brings one closer to the comprehensive experience of the subaltern in India through a sophisticated literary exploration that transcends simple documentation of oppression. The collection reveals the sufferings and coping mechanisms of those relegated to secondary status in society through powerful narrative techniques and authentic representation that avoid both sentimentality and simplistic political messaging. The stories demonstrate the intersection of caste discrimination with other forms of marginalization, including gender, economic exploitation, and educational exclusion, providing one of the earliest examples of intersectional analysis in Indian literature. What makes Bagul's work particularly significant is its refusal to present simple heroes or villains. Characters are neither black nor white, but "purely and simply human," caught in the complex web of socio-cultural forces that determine their possibilities (Bagul 76). This nuanced representation avoids the trap of reducing complex social realities to simplistic moral categories while maintaining clear political commitments to justice and human dignity. The collection's enduring power lies in its documentation of both the external conditions of subaltern life and the internal psychological processes by which individuals navigate systems of oppression.

The theoretical framework provided by the concepts of *vidroha* (revolt), *vedana* (pain), and *nakar* (dissent) proves remarkably durable for understanding not only historical forms of oppression but contemporary manifestations as well. The stories demonstrate how these three elements interact in complex ways, with pain providing the experiential foundation for both revolt and dissent, while dissent provides the intellectual framework for understanding the necessity of revolt. Bagul's literary techniques—particularly his combination of visceral realism with symbolic depth, his use of animal imagery to suggest both dehumanization and untamed power, and his integration of individual experience with historical and mythological contexts—have established new possibilities for representing subaltern experience in Indian literature.

One can feel optimistic about the kind of growth that Dalit literature has shown from being nowhere to having substantially made a mark on the literary scene of India. It has traversed across languages building a rebellion throughout the country by way of its uninhibited expressions. These expressions have not been submissive but remarkably rebellious. Dalits, the subalterns of India, have thus managed to shape a culture that can be characterized by self-respect and determination to be the change they wish to see (Limbale 203). Bagul's collection stands as a testament to the power of literature to give voice to the marginalized while maintaining artistic integrity and analytical sophistication. By documenting the "indigenous phenomenon of oppression" faced by Dalits, the stories contribute to broader understanding of how systems of domination operate and how they can be challenged. The collection's continued relevance demonstrates how authentic representation of subaltern experience can transcend specific historical and cultural contexts to speak to universal concerns about dignity, justice, and human worth.

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