



From Silence to Voice: The role of literature in caste emancipation as depicted by Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*

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ABSTRACT

India is known for its swiftly growing economy and technological advancements on a global scale, even though it also has an inflexible caste system. In the framework of India's caste system, Dalit literature is an essential genre, serving as a powerful medium for voicing the experiences of the marginalized Dalit community. It challenges entrenched social hierarchies and norms by exposing the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and oppression, through its raw and honest narratives. This paper traces and remnants the social realism, presenting an unflinching portrayal of the socioeconomic hardships, exploitation, and violence experienced by Dalits conceal their caste identity with the work of Baburao bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* which is a landmark in Dalit literature, breaking new ground by bringing Dalit voices and experiences to the forefront of Indian literature. His narratives expose the brutal realities of the caste system and its pervasive impact on every aspect of Dalit life. Bagul's portrayal of caste oppression and his celebration of Dalit resilience and dignity have made a significant contribution to the discourse on social justice and equality. Challenging mainstream literary conventions and societal norms.

Key words: Systemic discrimination, Untouchables, Dalit, Oppression, Identity crisis.

Baburao Bagul emerged as a pioneering voice in the 1960s, a period marked by social upheaval and a growing awareness of the need for Dalit emancipation. His collection of short stories, *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (When I Hid My Caste)*, published in 1963, is often cited as a landmark in Dalit literature. This work not only brought Dalit issues to the forefront but also established a distinct narrative style that was raw, powerful,

and unapologetically direct. His stories provided an authentic representation of Dalit life, characterized by brutal honesty and emotional intensity. By focusing on the lived experiences of Dalits, he challenged the sanitized and often romanticized portrayals of rural life prevalent in mainstream Marathi literature. His works highlighted the stark realities of caste-based oppression, poverty, and social exclusion, thereby giving voice to a marginalized community that had long been ignored. His works have not only enriched Indian literature but also played a crucial role in the socio-political awakening of the Dalit community.

His characters often grapple with the oppressive structures of the caste system and strive to assert their dignity and humanity. In *When I Hid My Caste*, Bagul explores the internal and external conflicts faced by Dalits as they navigate a society that dehumanizes them. It delves into the psychological trauma and moral dilemmas of a Dalit man who attempts to conceal his caste to escape discrimination, only to find that true liberation lies in embracing and asserting his identity. Bagul's emphasis on identity is crucial in understanding his impact on Dalit literature. He portrayed the complexities of Dalit identity, not as a monolithic experience but as a spectrum of struggles and resistances. This nuanced portrayal helped in fostering a sense of solidarity and collective identity among Dalits, inspiring them to challenge the existing life and fight for their rights. By articulating the injustices faced by Dalits, Bagul's writings helped to raise awareness and mobilize support for the Dalit cause. His influence extended to various Dalit movements, including the Dalit Panthers, which drew inspiration from his call for social justice and equality.

Focusing on the empowerment of marginalized voices, the exposure of social injustices, the humanization of the oppressed, and the inspiration for social change; Bagul's literature is its provision of a platform for the voiceless. Dalits, who have been historically oppressed and marginalized, find a voice in his stories. By bringing their experiences, struggles, and aspirations to the forefront, Bagul not only validates their existence but also empowers them. His vivid and authentic portrayal of Dalit life encourages a sense of identity and solidarity within the community. Through his narratives, Bagul ensures that the silenced voices are heard, fostering a collective consciousness that is crucial for any emancipatory movement.

Baburao Bagul's legacy in Dalit literature is profound and enduring. His pioneering efforts opened the doors for subsequent generations of Dalit writers who continued to explore themes of caste, identity, and resistance. Authors such as Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and Urmila Pawar have acknowledged Bagul's influence on their work, carrying forward his mission of giving voice to the marginalized. Moreover, Bagul's relevance extends beyond the literary realm. His exploration of caste dynamics continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about social justice and equality in India. As caste-based discrimination persists in various forms, Bagul's work remains a powerful reminder of the need for continued vigilance and activism.

"Means an Untouchable" (Bagul, 120), Untouchability is a practice rooted in the caste system, where Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables," are relegated to the lowest stratum of society, facing severe social exclusion and discrimination. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar critiqued untouchability as a mechanism for maintaining Brahminical supremacy and systemic social and economic exploitation of Dalits. Bagul provides a powerful depiction of the systemic and pervasive nature of untouchability in Indian society. Dalit characters often face

social ostracism and humiliation. Through the character of Masthur, who is forced to hide his caste identity to escape discrimination, reflecting the pervasive stigma attached to being a Dalit. The realistic portrayal of untouchability in Bagul's stories aligns with the theoretical framework that emphasizes the prejudice caste-based discrimination. His narratives serve as a powerful tool for social critique and advocacy.

Through a series of narratives, Bagul depicts social ostracism, economic exploitation, and cultural dehumanization, all central elements of untouchability. His realistic portrayal of Dalit experiences serves as a powerful indictment of the caste system and a call for social justice and reform. One of the primary ways character resist caste oppression is through acts of personal defiance. In the titular story, *When I Hid My Caste* the protagonist's decision to conceal his caste identity to escape discrimination and gain social acceptance is a poignant example of this. While hiding one's caste may seem like a form of compliance, it is also an act of subversion against a societal norm that dictates one's worth based on birth. The protagonist's concealment of his caste is not merely an act of survival but a form of silent rebellion against the rigid caste system that dehumanizes him. By successfully passing as a non-Dalit, he challenges the very basis of caste discrimination, asserting his right to be judged by his merits rather than his caste.

Moreover, characters in Bagul's stories frequently assert their dignity and self-respect in the face of humiliation. This is evident in instances where Dalit characters refuse to perform menial tasks imposed upon them by higher castes. Such refusals are acts of defiance that challenge the dehumanizing expectations of the caste hierarchy. By asserting their dignity, these characters resist the societal norms that seek to devalue their humanity and reclaim their self-worth. This assertion of dignity is a powerful form of resistance, as it directly confronts the internalized inferiority that the caste system seeks to impose on Dalits.

Socio-political activism is another significant avenue through which characters in Bagul's stories resist caste oppression. Characters are often depicted engaging with political movements and participating in efforts to bring about legal and societal reforms. This activism is a direct challenge to the status quo and seeks to address the structural inequalities that underpin caste-based discrimination. The characters are shown organizing and leading protests, advocating for the rights of Dalits and demanding justice. This engagement with political activism highlights the role of Dalit leaders and activists in the broader struggle for caste emancipation. Bagul's depiction of socio-political activism underscores the necessity of confronting the systemic nature of caste oppression through organized and sustained efforts.

Baburao Bagul masterfully depicts the myriad ways in which Dalit characters resist caste oppression and assert their agency. Through personal defiance, cultural reclamation, collective resistance, and socio-political activism, by encountering the character's challenge and subvert the oppressive structures that seek to marginalize them. Bagul's narratives not only highlight the harsh realities of caste discrimination but also celebrate the resilience, dignity, and agency of those who resist it. In doing so, Bagul's work serves as a powerful testament to the enduring struggle for justice and equality in the face of entrenched social hierarchies.

Assertion of Dignity and Self-Worth; Dalit characters assert their dignity by refusing to accept menial tasks or degrading treatment from upper-caste individuals. For instance, when characters reject demeaning jobs or refuse to tolerate unjust treatment, they are making a bold statement about their inherent worth and equality. These moments of assertion are crucial for challenging the internalized inferiority and societal expectations imposed upon Dalits. By standing up for themselves and refusing to accept discriminatory treatment, these characters reject the dehumanizing aspects of the caste system. This act of asserting dignity is not just about personal self-respect but also about resisting the broader social norms that seek to marginalize and oppress. It symbolizes a reclamation of self-worth and a challenge to the systemic inequities that perpetuate caste-based discrimination.

Beyond raising awareness and fostering empathy, Bagul's literature serves as a catalyst for social change. His powerful storytelling inspires both the oppressed and the sympathetic readers to take action against caste-based injustices. By highlighting the resilience and resistance of Dalits, Bagul instills a sense of hope and possibility. His work encourages marginalized communities to fight for their rights and dignity, while also urging the broader society to support the cause of caste emancipation. In this way, literature becomes a vital instrument for social transformation. A key aspect of Bagul's work is his ability to humanize Dalit characters, who are often dehumanized by mainstream narratives. Bagul portrayed his characters with depth, dignity, and complexity. This humanization fosters empathy and understanding among readers, breaking down the stereotypes and prejudices that perpetuate caste discrimination. By presenting Dalits as fully realized individuals with their own dreams, fears, and resilience, Bagul challenges the dehumanizing narratives and asserts their inherent worth and humanity.

'In this luck-forsaken country, human beings should not be born as Dalits. If and when they are, they must bear such sorrow and such disrespect as would make death seem an easier option, making a cup of poison a Dalit's best friend.' (Bagul, 116), This is a harrowing reflection on the brutal realities of caste discrimination in India. This statement captures the profound despair and systemic injustice that define the Dalit experience. The phrase "luck-forsaken country" underscores the pervasive inequality and entrenched social injustice that characterize Indian society, particularly concerning the caste system. It suggests a nation where fortune does not favour those born into the lower strata of the caste hierarchy that conveys a sense of hopelessness and frustration with a society that consistently fails to provide equal opportunities, fairness, and dignity to all its citizens, especially Dalits.

Being born a Dalit in this context is tantamount to being born into a life of automatic disenfranchisement and suffering, solely based on one's birth. Dalits endure daily acts of humiliation and disrespect, ranging from verbal abuse to systemic exclusion from societal privileges and resources. This persistent disrespect undermines their human dignity and self-worth. The cumulative effect of such constant disrespect and marginalization results in profound sorrow, impacting mental health and overall well-being. The societal structures are designed to perpetuate this sorrow, making it a daily reality for Dalits.

The extreme despair that can result from sustained oppression. It suggests that the weight of living under such oppressive conditions can be so overwhelming that death might appear as a preferable alternative. The relentless discrimination and disrespect contribute to severe psychological trauma, leading some to contemplate or prefer death over the unending struggle for dignity and respect. Through this stark portrayal, Bagul emphasizes the urgent need for empathy, awareness, and systemic change. His work calls for the dismantling of oppressive structures and the creation of a society where all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their birth. It captures the extreme sorrow and disrespect faced by Dalits, suggesting that such conditions make death seem like a preferable option. This quote, therefore, is not just a reflection of the Dalit experience but a call to action for social justice and reform.

Bagul's significance in Dalit literature cannot be overstated. His groundbreaking work not only enriched Indian literature but also played a crucial role in the socio-political awakening of the Dalit community. By providing an authentic and unflinching portrayal of Dalit life, Bagul helped to articulate the struggles and aspirations of a marginalized community, inspiring generations of writers and activists. His legacy endures as a testament to the power of literature as a tool for social change and a voice for the oppressed. *When I Hid My Caste* exemplifies the profound role that literature can play in caste emancipation. Through his evocative narratives, Bagul provides a voice to the voiceless, exposes social injustices, humanizes the oppressed, and inspires social change. His work is a testament to the power of literature to challenge oppressive systems and foster a more just and equitable society. As we reflect on Bagul's contributions, it becomes clear that literature is not merely a reflection of society, but a potent force for its transformation.

Bagul offers a poignant and unvarnished look at the socioeconomic hardships, exploitation, and violence that compel Dalits to conceal their caste identity. Through his powerful storytelling, Bagul not only documents the pervasive nature of caste-based oppression but also humanizes the struggle of Dalits to assert their dignity in a deeply prejudiced society. His work remains a crucial contribution to Dalit literature, shedding light on the urgent need for social justice and equality. He believed that only Dalit literature had the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology bring out a total transformation. This work serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and the ongoing quest for social justice in the face of profound adversity.

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