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How caste hides in a caste-ridden society: Dalit aesthetics and politics in Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*

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Abstract

This abstract discusses the emergence of Dalit literature in India in the mid-twentieth century, focusing on Marathi writer Baburao Bagul's role in this literary movement. It begins by examining the historical context of Indian literature, which largely ignored or invisibilized the representation of Dalits and lower castes due to preoccupation with anti-colonial consciousness. Bagul's works can be understood as a subversion of the predominant Brahmanical literature, which was viewed as the literature of the upper-caste Brahmin population, and an attempt to give voice to the voiceless in society. The abstract also discusses the origins of the Dalit literary movements and the pivotal role of B.R. Ambedkar's framework of equality and justice in encouraging the Dalit youths of the 1950s to pursue higher education and engage with literary production. The emergence of Dalit literature in the 1960s provided a space for Dalit characters to exercise agency and autonomy within literary texts, with characters often speaking in the common parlance of their own communities and rejecting Brahmanical and Sanskritic paradigms.

Keywords: Dalit literature, brahmanical literature, dalit characters, caste

Introduction

Marathi writer Baburao Bagul's assertion that "the established literature of India is Hindu literature" aptly sets the premise for any analysis that attempts to theorize Dalit Literature (Dangle 289). One can understand not only Baburao Bagul's works within the context of engaging this very prevalent characteristic of 'Indian Literature' but also that of all other authors who fall under the rubric of Dalit writing, writing in the many languages of the diverse nation. Such a Manichaean engagement may look prescriptive and limited for the untrained in the vagaries of a pervasive caste system but it is valid both as an act of conscious subversion and as narrativization of the further socio-cognitive effects of a hierarchical order integral to the socio-religious and economic characteristics of Brahmanical Hinduism.

The corpus of Indian Literature preceding Baburao Bagul's entry into the literary domain (circa late 1950s) is characterized precisely by its unwillingness to critically and earnestly engage with aspects pertaining to Dalit society. Despite a few attempts by progressive upper-caste writers like Premchand in Hindustani and Mulk Raj Anand in English, it would not be wrong to conclude that the majority of Indian Literature in the pre-independence period was principally preoccupied with anti-colonial consciousness. Neglecting the internal contradictions and complexities within the Indian society, the writers instead fixated themselves on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. It was generally believed that dealing with the issues of Caste would divide the internal consolidation of Indian unity against the colonizers. This led to a literary tradition that invisibilized the representation of Dalits and the lower-castes in the Indian Literatures^[1].

There were no immediate course corrections in the trajectory of this literary tradition in the decades following Indian independence in 1947. The postcolonial anxieties of a nascent nation in the wake of a violent partition and extreme human suffering also did not concede any new space to the 'internal critique' of caste. Baburao Bagul's works can be understood within this backdrop wherein he projects his literary expressions as an alternative to the predominant Brahmanical Literature-- lampooned as the 'the literature of the 3½' in

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¹ The author does not endorse or mean to perpetuate the hierarchy implied in the usage of these terminologies. The reason for retaining the popular and prevalent usage is due to its historical importance. It would be difficult to engage with the Dalit discourse without grounding our semantics within the power dynamics of history.

reference to the disproportionate representation of the ethos of a tiny, upper-caste Brahmin population in the mainstream literature (xiii).

Baburao Bagul's stance drew from the progressive thought that the Dalit scholars before him had developed. According to Gail Omvedt, a number of researchers have attempted to trace the origins of the Dalit literary movements. Some consider the philosophy of Gautam Buddha (563 BCE-483 BCE) to be the fountainhead, for some it is the saint-poet Chokhamela (14C AD). In the modern period, one can find resonances of the same with the ideals of Mahatma Phule (1827-1890) and Professor S. M. Mate (1886-1957). However, there is a general consensus amongst these scholars that the term and concept 'Dalit Literature' did not really exist back then, regardless of the general engagement of discontent and disillusionment against the injustices meted out to the Dalits (formerly called Untouchables). While Chokhamela, Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the oppression against the lower-castes, the ultimate impetus was B. R. Ambedkar's attempt in the twentieth century to mobilise the lower-castes to rebel against the oppressive structure of Caste system. Ambedkar systematically formulated the framework that allowed the Dalit society to articulate their concerns and foster a sense of self-respect in tandem with self-identification in Dalit Literature (xxiii).

Ambedkarites or those who follow the ideology of Ambedkar could challenge the dominant narrative of anti-colonial nationalist Literature as Ambedkar's critical idiom took on the Brahmanical aspects of the Indian National Congress-led national movement and the colonial exploitation practiced by the British. His contributions in enshrining the credo of equality and justice within the general framework of the Constitution of India encouraged the Dalit youths of the 1950s to graduate from the Sidharth College in Bombay which he established in 1945 with a sense of caste annihilation and social justice. Reaping the benefits of the affirmative actions (Reservation Policy) that allowed access to academic fora and avenues, Dalits who aspired to subvert the ideological hegemony of the Brahmins in the sphere of Marathi Literature soon converged into a force to be reckoned with.

The culmination of all this ideological and political reawakening fuelled a spurt in literary production by Dalits in the 1960s. These writers aimed to accord voice to the voiceless in and via their stories. Contrary to the earlier sporadic Dalit characters written by upper-caste authors, these voices were not subservient or subject to the whimsical savior complex of the purportedly progressive, upper-caste, reformist, collective psyche. Their characters spoke in the common parlance of their own communities while often employing language and expressions rooted in the crass and crude dialects of the Dalit everyday experience, rejected Brahmanical and Sanskritic allegories to further their plots, and, most importantly, for the first time, depicted Dalit characters exercising agency and autonomy. These characters, for the first time, gained language and political consciousness within the literary texts.

*Chewing trotters in the badlands
my grandpa,
the permanent resident of my body,
the household of tradition heaped on his back,*

*hollers at me,
'You whore-son, talk like we do.
Talk, I tell you!'*

*Picking through the Vedas
his top-knot well-oiled with ghee
my Brahmin teacher tells me
'You idiot, use the language correctly!
Now I ask you,
Which language should I speak?*

-Arun Kamble, *Which Language should I speak?* (62)

Uniqueness of Jevja Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (When I Hid My Caste)

Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories *Jevja Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (tr. *When I Hid My Caste*) published in 1963 is a scathing indictment of the malignant caste system which reduced certain sections of the society to hopelessness and utter destitution. It was published in the run-up to the formation of Bagul's revolutionary Dalit social organization, Dalit Panthers, and shocked the sensibilities of typical Marathi readers who were accustomed to the complacent status-quoist writing which portrayed the socio-political realities in a way that had invisibilized the voices and the struggles of the Dalits and other subaltern communities. The dominant literary mode deliberately trivialised and obscured the harsh realities of Dalit lives. The Dalit characters were incidental in the upper-caste literary imagination as they were either depicted as powerless victims or deserving the destruction that was their narrative fate.

It was only after many years of Indian independence—overlapping with the publication of *When I Hid My Caste* in 1963—that the Marathi short story was freed from the clutches of the somnolent *navkatha* tradition ^[2]. This entailed a shift from the 'individual to social, from a refined received literary language to an explosion of variegated speech, from a relatively simple narrative point of view to a more complex one and more significantly, from the so-called modern to a decidedly native cast' (Kimbahune 2). All of these characteristics aptly define Bagul's preoccupations and literary expressions.

Bagul's short stories reject the facile sophistry of his upper-caste predecessors and contemporaries in Marathi literature. His prose is replete with themes that are anchored on strict ideological grounds that avoids trite didacticism. Bagul employs the *Vidharb* dialect of the Marathi language that was predominantly used by the poverty-stricken, subaltern castes of that region. His works thereby not only serve as

² Kimbahune asserts that the Marathi literary critics conflated the *navkatha* (implying a new form of story that deviated from the literary formulations of the earlier writings) with *adhunik-katha* (implying a modernist form of writing that critically engaged with progressive themes like social injustices and marked the beginnings of protagonists belonging to the lower-strata of the Hindu society). While the former merely experimented with the Form, the latter attempted to pioneer a radical transformation to the Subject matter and characterisation as well.

empowering but also ratify the voice(s) of the people that have been marginalized and rendered invisible historically, politically, and socially.

Bagul's Dalit characters do not exemplify the subservient 'Gandhian attitudes' ^[3] of a typical Premchand character. His women characters celebrate the urge to live with dignity and selfhood. He avoids constructing them within the upper-caste male gaze that characterises the portrayal of women characters as hyper-sexualised objects by the upper-caste authors. Bagul asserts and reclaims the dignity of Dalit women characters by liberating them from the sexualised gaze of upper-caste authors who narrativize them as mere instruments of hegemonic desire.

Bagul's characters are not individuals suspended in a 'literary' world without a causal effect but get constituted in terms of the contextual socio-cultural milieu. This entails the usage of a wide variety of Marathi dialects by his characters. Additionally, the vicissitudes of diverse cultural ethos were critically explored to dismantle the monopoly of earlier parochial and unidimensional literary interventions. This mode of writing confronted the middle-class sensibilities which usually lapsed into solipsism devoid of any socio-moral constructs or feedback. Writers like Baburao Bagul bestowed upon the Marathi literary scene a possibility of developing a political language that could counter the hegemony of the upper-caste literature, thereby fostering a socio-revolutionary consciousness amongst the Marathi public.

The Legacy of Babul's Iconoclasm

Babul's literary outburst shaped the tenets and credo of the radical Dalit literature that developed in the late 1970s, especially with the rise of the Dalit Panthers and other short story writers like Amitabh, Sharankumar Limbale and Waman Howal. Bagul's place is cemented as a precursor to the radical Dalit literary movements for formulating a framework that questioned moral and literary superiority of the *navkatha* writers who possessed a "middle-class penchant of soft-explanation, complacency and glorification" (Kimbahune 5).

Bagul's literary style finds resonance in the works of Dalit Panthers in the 70s, where Limbale points to the "impolite, uncouth languages of the Dalits" ^[4] and the rejection of the

³ Characterised by the Gandhian idealism of *satyagraha* and self-sacrifice as a means of resisting brutalities meted out to Dalit characters in the works of upper-caste authors. This prevalent stereotyping of Dalit characters as helpless victims who employ a rhetoric of sympathy instead of assertive socio-political articulations. Dalit Sahitya Akademi president, Sohanpal Sumanakshar, opines that this prototypical characterisation, especially in the works of Premchand, serves to reinforce the status-quoist caste structures by appropriating Dalit assertions within the scope of mainstream Brahmanical philosophy.

⁴ The development of this mode of linguistic and formal resistance gains significant prominence in the poetry of the Dalit poets of the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Namdeo Dhasal. Dilip Chitre, the Marathi poet and literary critic states that "The graphic imagery of Dhasal's poem often zooms in on the contents of sewers and stagnant pools of water that even in their verbalized and therefore somewhat distanced form hit us by way of sight and smell. Our senses

"standard language" with its "cultivated gestures and grammar". Laura Brueck, in her book *Writing Resistance* (2014), argues that the poetic and literary registers of the Dalit authors like Limbale are informed by the '*bibhatsa rasa*' ^[5] or the aesthetics of revulsion. Such a phenomenon lies in stark contrast to the literary form that finds its way into the annals of the Sahitya Akademi's accolades. Privileging *bibhatsa rasa* dis-enfranchises the Dalit literary imagination to ever be regarded as Indian canon which further disillusioned Dalits against the legitimacy of the 'national' literary institutions (Brueck 101).

Writers who were inspired by Bagul's corpus like Amitabh also deployed Marathi vernacular dialects to critique the social inequalities and expose the gruesome realities faced by Dalits. Despite these developments, the subsequent movements in the Dalit literary field produced writers who were soon disillusioned by their leaders and the unchanging conditions of the casteist society. This particular attitude informed the backdrop of the works of Limbale and Waman Howal. It is within this wider context that we have to contextualise Bagul's anthology *When I Hid My Caste*. However, an unthinking impulse to reject formalism in all its tenets in order to subvert the limitations imposed by realism can degenerate into postmodern proclivity, thereby further neglecting the cohesive theorisation of social movements. Bagul's works are an attempt to confront this complexity and conceive a radical literary landscape that effectively critiques the caste system from within the mainstream literary institutions. *When I Hid My Caste* exemplifies an aesthetic and political shift by claiming a literary space for those who were never part of the imagination/narrative.

Until the 1960s, Dalit characters were stripped of their autonomy and agency. The new Dalit characters, however, were not only vociferously vocal against the oppressive prejudicial systems operating against them but also possessed political consciousness to mobilize and consolidate their protests/projects against the caste system. Essentially, these characters embodied the spirit of the Ambedkarite assertive war cry of "Educate, Agitate, Organize" against the Caste system (Bush).

This characterization subverted the archetypal depiction of the Dalit characters even in the writings of stalwarts like Premchand, U.R. Ananthamurthy and Mulk Raj Anand. For instance, Premchand, who has been considered one of the earliest writers to engage in the project of reformation of the society through literature in India, has been critiqued by Dalit scholars for his portrayal of Dalit characters. Paralleling the burning of *Manusmriti* by Ambedkar in 1927 during the Mahad Satyagraha as a symbolic rebellion against the Caste oppression, the Dalit Sahitya Akademi burned Premchand's *Rangbhumi* (1924) in 2004. In her book, *The Dalit Limit Point Realism* Toral Gajarawala describes this event as burning "not only a novel but an icon, a worldview, a genre, an ideology" (Gajarawala 33).

are besieged, as it were, by almost palpable filth and stink. Namdeo seemed to be launching a guerilla war against the effete middle class and sanitized world of the literary readers". This undertaking draws from the literary energies of Bagul's unapologetic literary formulations.

⁵Aesthetic of revulsion

Although Premchand has been lauded for including lower-caste characters in his texts that had been absent in centuries of literary works, his depictions have been termed as stereotypical and status-quoist argues that despite his sympathetic disposition toward the lower-castes, Premchand's lower-caste characters are either lacking in autonomy relegating them to the typological paradigm of peasant and are always on the receiving end of mercy or "change of heart" of his upper-caste characters (33). Rebuking Premchand for his Gandhian idealism which rejected any radical or revolutionary transformation in the social fabric of the country, Toral Gajarawala brings out the psychological split of the upper-caste progressive writers who could not strip their subconscious off the caste prejudices regardless of their conscious efforts to do so. She provides the example of the protagonist of Premchand's canonical novel *Godaan* [The Gift of a Cow] (1936) in which all the troubles and atrocities that befall Hori are due to caste hierarchies in the village but Premchand instead attacks the culture of capitalism. Gajarawala claims:

Hori's financial worries are intricately bound up with the maintenance of caste practices; social transgression leads to fines, which lead to still more debt. His most impassioned speeches to his fiery wife Dhaniya revolve around caste. "We're all bound to the caste, and we can't break away from it," "Life outside the caste was unthinkable," the narrator/character confirms, in a classic moment of free indirect discourse. The strictures of caste produce the tragedy of Jhuniya, whose widowhood makes her unmarriageable, as well as that of Siliya, both of whom additionally burden Hori's family economically (44).

Thus, by focusing exclusively on economic aspects, Premchand effectively pretends as though Hori's characters were casteless in their transactions through rural Northern India.

Similarly, U. R. Ananthamurthy, in his novel *Samskara* (1965), exposes the decadence of the Brahmin society that celebrated the insidious caste system that is incongruous with the ideals of modernity but his indictment of the caste system still falls short as his portrayal of lower-caste women comes across as extremely sexist and stereotypical. Sharon Pillai in her essay *Gender Representation in U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara* contends that the portrayal of lower-caste women, despite being rife with cultural symbols of the mythological Hindu past which strengthens their character, presents them as overtly sexual beings. The presumption is that sexual prowess is itself a form of empowerment. Pillai quotes Mukherjee to critique this:

Chastity, satitva, and penance for widows cannot be the values of a class that does not have the economic means to enforce them, and apparently, this freedom adds to the uninhibited naturalness of the lower-caste women. But the formation of a stereotype is not a simple process. The easy availability of lower-caste women may also have imbued them with a greater erotic aura in the male imagination (Mukherjee 172).

Ananthamurthy's characters such as Belli and Chandri are overtly sexualized wherein their absence of voice translates into a lack of volition and consent since both are mere props for the male author and the male characters to satisfy their shared hetero-sexual upper-caste male gaze and intellectualized desire/lust.

The History of Marathi Short Story

It is important to provide a brief historical contextualization and survey of the short story genre in Marathi wherein lies the subversive pastures of Bagul's corpus. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu declare in their introduction to *The Exercise of Freedom*, "Dalit Literature does not grow out of the literary discussion or the practice of writers. It is a social movement invested in the battle against injustice and driven by the hope of freedom, not simply a literary trend or a formal development" (Satyanarayana and Tharu 8). It is within this political rather than purely aesthetic framework that we can situate the works of Baburao Bagul. Marathi short-story, a prolific genre of literary production, primarily served as the source of entertainment for the Maharashtrian upper-caste society. This is evident from eagerly sought out publications of special magazines released annually on Deewali and literary periodicals which supplied these stories in plenty (Kimbahune 1). It was not until the emergence of Dalit short-story writers like Anna Bhau Sathe and Baburao Bagul in the 1960s that the Marathi short-story acquired its subversive socio-political character.

In his paper, *A Note on Contemporary Short Story in Marathi*, R. S. Kimbahune maps out the sociological analysis of the Marathi short story and distinguishes Baburao Bagul's works from works of other earlier short story writers. He argues that unlike those works, Baburao Bagul's short stories can be regarded as heralding a radical break with individualistic concerns because his stories deal with larger social themes. Kimbahune contends that Bagul's works, in retrospect, stand out not only in their linguistic formulations and thematic concerns but also in precipitating "the latter day development of Dalit and Gramin[rural] literature in all their diversity" (2).

The overwhelming laghu-katha^[6] trend—fiction that can typically be read in one sitting focusing on a self-contained incident or series—prompted the prominent Marathi scholar Bhalchandra Nemade to articulate an indictment against the short story tradition in Marathi literature. He believed that the preoccupation on the individual and formalist characteristics one finds in this form was an indication of the lack of sociological fervour required to break through the highly graded social inequality manifested in the hierarchical society of Maharashtra.

According to Kimbahune, what distinguishes Bagul's writing from the earlier works is his concern for the social and material realities plaguing the lives of the "down-trodden castes, the destitute, the depraved, the criminals" (3). This deviation from the earlier works' preoccupation with formalistic obsessions, and refined language that solely pandered to the issues faced by the middle class, is precisely what renders Bagul's writing radical in its social activism. Earlier Marathi short story writers like Gangadhar Gopal Gadgil, Aravind Gokhale and Purushottam Bhaskar Bhave, suggests Kimbahune, predominantly concerned themselves with middle-class worldview rendered in the language of the literati. Despite their linguistic, structural and formal sophistication, these stories are unable to depict the social realities shaped by the systemic forces of caste. "Gadgil, Gokhale and Bhave represent the spirit of experimentation that aims at formal excellence but ill-conceals their concern for their individual and his/her psyche, cut-off, as it were,

⁶ Short Story

from a sense of society" (2).

The dominant literary aesthetics, Kimbahune speculates, could be attributed to the conflation of *navkatha* and *adhunik-katha* in the post-Independence Marathi literary domain. Unable to distinguish the characteristics of *navkatha* from *adhunik-katha*, which is the Marathi equivalent of modern or modernist, the critics seemed to have legitimised the brand of writing of Gadgil, Gokhale and Bhave unquestionably. This triumvirate produced, legitimised, perpetuated and hegemonized the *navkatha* tradition in the Marathi short story as highbrow culture, thereby discouraging any literary expression by marginalised castes in their own voice and language that was stereotyped as "simple" and "rural". The compulsion with formal persuasions rendered the writings of the upper-caste authors as mere sophistry and highfalutin, whereas, the language and thematic concerns of the Dalit authors were regarded as vulgar, reinforcing the archetypal casteist dichotomy of Sanskrit/classical as pure and Vernacular/dialects as impure.

Resistance and Resurgence in Bagul

The upper-caste depiction of Dalits reinforced the already held prejudices of the readers against the Dalits. It further perpetuated the ideology that led to brutal caste atrocities. Baburao Bagul fought against this literary conception that only privileged the upper castes and their narratives. He did so by employing and introducing not only empowered Dalit characters but also by reclaiming the humanity of the dehumanised Dalit characters of the upper-caste imagination. Bagul challenges the traditional framework where characters are either completely helpless victims or idealist in their actions.

For instance, in the story titled 'Bohada', Damu, the Mahar protagonist, wishes to perform a dance in the village festival (Bagul 1). Dalits have been historically denied the right to participate in public ceremonies and rituals. It is believed that Dalits would pollute the sacred and invite the wrath of God by sullyng the sanctity of the rituals. Damu's demand offends the casteist sensibilities of the village community. Horrified at the suggestion of such a transgression, and yet bound by the decree of the District Collector, they orchestrate a conniving scheme to discourage Damu from performing. The upper-caste villagers demand a hefty sum of Rs.200--impossible to obtain for a Mahar-- to perform. Unlike an upper-caste writer's characterization of Dalit characters as helpless and unable to escape the fetters of the system, Bagul's protagonist Damu breaks the mold of the victimized Dalit trope and asserts his determination by smartly outwitting the scheming upper-castes by not backing out even when higher sums were demanded to clinch the matter in his favor. Shanta Gokhale points out in her introduction to the English translation of the anthology:

The best Dalit writings, and Bagul's is up there in the vanguard, does not articulate its commitment to this social 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, but simply human (xi).

Rendering Dalit characters realistically humanised allows the readers to understand and empathise with the plight of

their horrible lives, the cause of which is the hegemonic structures of the caste system and not any intrinsic human flaw.

For instance, through the African [Ethiopian] protagonist of the story *Gangster*, the readers are allowed an internal view of the protagonist's intricate life which led him to a life of crime and also a peep into his consciousness thereby allowing the reader to gain perspective about his actions (44). Bagul allows the protagonist to justify his descent into criminality by textually suggesting that a poverty-stricken life and utter despair forced him into this path. Bagul's attempt to revitalize and rediscover sentimentality in a stout gang member allows him to break the mould of stereotypical archetypes into which marginalized characters have been forced. The very fact that a murderer's narrative is prioritized over other narratives is subversive in its literary formulation and revolutionary in its intent.

Another instance of this subversive humanization is evident in the story *Competition* where Bagul insists on proving every prejudiced notion of an ideal woman as regressive (71). Full of twists and turns, the women in *Competition* refuse to give in to the patriarchal conception that views an independent woman either as a prostitute or as one overstepping the set limits in the normative social system.

As Shanta Gokhale asserts, it does not matter to Baburao Bagul if the woman in *Streetwalker* walks out of desperation or choice. What matters is the fact that her dilemma is one of the universal human problems. This non-judgmental gaze is diametrically opposed to the sexualized portrayal of lower-caste characters written by upper-caste writers where the focus is on the lower-caste body and not the circumstances which forced her to that vocation (33).

Dalit characters in Bagul's collection are courageous and assert their place in the social system with strong articulations which disturb the upper-caste worldview and moral order. The protagonist of the titular story of the collection proudly proclaims throughout the story the importance of Dalits as active participants in the creation of a new India. Bagul celebrates their defiant courage. The protagonist of the story is asked about his caste in the most arbitrary situation, and he retorts, "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 118). The protagonist then reinforces his Marathi identity by associating himself with the tradition of the great leader Ambedkar: "I am from Mumbai. I am a graduate of the University of the Revolution. The people whom Manu rejected, whom he would have consigned to the dust-heap, who brought this great country its freedom, were those from my city. I am one of those great worker-warriors. My hands are the wheels of Bharat's progress. I said in chaste Sanskritized Hindi" (123).

Both these quotes illustrate what humanized and empowered Dalit characters full of vigor and strongly articulated voices may look like. This harks back to the debate that the publication of this short story collection brought to the fore: that of the radical difference in literary tastes and reception of these stories and Dalit Literature as a wider phenomenon. Shirish Pai, who wrote the Introduction for the Marathi edition in 1963, felt that Bagul's characters were perverse and lacked literary standards. What is not realized is the

deliberate decision on the part of Bagul, who conceived Dalit Literature as humanist literature and believed that it was the "cultural conditioning, their psyche and their mythology" which did not allow upper-caste writers to portray the lives of the downtrodden Shudra and Atishudra [7].

The titular short story acutely portrays the story of a Dalit man who moves to an urban space in the city of Gujarat. His compulsion to conceal his caste identity exposes the loopholes in the fallacious argument that Caste is a characteristic of rural ethos. This analysis is contended by numerous Dalit authors who challenge the misconception heralded by the urban people who refuse to believe that Caste has permeated the lives of urban social dynamics beyond the rural spaces as well. Ambedkar's assertion, "What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance and narrow mindedness", despite being a sound assertion is rendered inadequate when aspirational Dalit find themselves in the same quagmires in urban spaces as well (Jaffrelot 110). Another Ambedkarite parallel can be found in the story when the protagonist of the story is hounded by mob and escapes the mob lynching closely. Ambedkar's own experiences of escaping the ire of a vicious mob during his stay in a Baroda Parsi inn for concealing his caste resonate in Bagul's short story even after 30 years (Ambedkar 671). Bagul argues in his essay *Dalit Literature is but Human Literature* that the established literature of India was "Hindu, upper class and elitist literature" and that the lowest classes were left out from the literary echelons (Dangle 290). He saw Dalit writing as a means of presenting new thoughts and themes to the public and for presenting the readers with a new kind of hero. For instance, in the story *Prisoners of Darkness*, Bagul personifies the temples, which function as sites of economic and spiritual power in the Brahmanical society, as a representative of the Hindu social order's disdain towards Dalits. Utterances such as "She's tired. Get hold of her. Fuck her senseless", 'Let's grab her' resonate inside the temple compound when Banoo is being raped (Bagul 13). The upper-caste characters in the story do not conform to the sanctimonious portrayals written by Brahmin authors, instead, they hurl the most obscene profanities exposing the Sanskrit speaking pious Brahmin trope ossified in the writing of the upper-caste authors. For instance, the village Brahmin Kanhuji Patil brazenly encourages the sexual harassment of Banoo: "Bring that demon here. Let's strip her naked and take her in procession through the village". Another upper-caste villager zealously responds "No, let's strip her naked and tie her up like a bull and lead her by the nose to the pyre" (5).

Towards a Conclusion: Why and Who alongside When

Baburao Bagul's engagement with the political and social problems of caste is explored in all the ten stories in *When I Hid My Caste* wherein he attempts to delve into topics that were excluded from the literature of his time. Bagul's works embody the conceptualization of what the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his work *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction* (1977), theorized as "cultural capital". According to Bourdieu, cultural and social capital consists of the constitution of a

person's personality that promote social mobility in stratified hierarchical societies. This includes the language a person speaks, mannerisms, similar tastes in cultural productions like movies, music, books, etc. These forms of social signaling are accumulated historically by a class and confer status and power to its participants (Bourdieu 71). Since Dalits have been historically denied to accumulate social and cultural capital--along with economic capital--they do not possess the intellectual predisposition to develop high-brow literary tastes. Bagul subverts this notion of Literature and restores it as the conduit for addressing the issues of Bahujan [Masses who mostly comprise the Dalits and lower-castes, and include converted minorities] (Gurusamy 98).

This worldview equips him with the political wherewithal to challenge the dominant narratives of caste and articulate his discontent in such a way that his stories address the systematic and historical process of oppressing the Dalits, and hence the concluding line in his collection: "When was I beaten by them? It was Manu who thrashed me" (Bagul 135). This resolute denouement serves as a scathing criticism against Hindu Dharma Shastras (religious texts)--especially *Manusmriti*-- which legitimized caste-based violence

Who hides one's caste? Why does one hide caste? When does one hide caste? A systematic and thorough research into these questions will lead to the foundational inequity inscribed into the body politic of a living civilization that straddles centuries-old tradition and a modern constitutional national identity. Baburao Bagul's oeuvre, especially his collection of stories *When I Hid My Caste*, provides us questions as well as possible answers in the typical manner of art as life.

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⁷ Other Backward Classes and Dalits (Formerly known as Untouchables)

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