

A CRITIQUE OF GENDERED SUBALTERN AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN DALIT LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JAANAKI IN *SOOD*

Brihaspati H. Shinde

Dept. of English
D. D. Shinde Sarkar College
Kolhapur, Maharashtra
brihaspati55@gmail.com

&

Dr. D. R. More

Academic Advisor,
Former Director, B. C. U.D.,
Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra

Abstract

Questioning the repetition of the figure of the new Indian woman in resolving the spatiotemporal paradoxes of the nation. The argument that the figure of the subaltern woman is a necessary counter. The arrival of the gendered subaltern on the national stage is celebrated through discourses that articulate and disarticulate the subaltern woman and bear the traces of subaltern struggles. Gendered Subaltern and Cultural Hybridity are the literary glossaries found in literary criticism since second half of the last century especially. Both the key concepts are being considered even in Indian literature in the contemporary Marathi Dalit literature as well. Discrimination and violence is seen in the concerned marginal groups. Everybody is aware of what Dalit literature is, its background and basic beliefs. Violence against Dalit women and Dalit women against violence, double bind victims within and without society, triple burden of their caste, class and gender are examples of discrimination and segregation depicted in Dalit literature. Social background can be studied within the parameters of Post-Colonial context, along with the perception of the Dalit writers and Dalit Feminists across the spectrum of society.

Keywords: Subordinate, Gendered Subaltern, Cultural Hybridity, Womanism, Womanhood, Manuwadi, Murali

The paper explores in the distinct ways the ideas of Gendered Subaltern and Cultural Hybridity with special reference to Dalit writer Baburao Bagul's nightmarish Marathi novella *Sood (Revenge)*, published in 1970, and moved towards humanitarianism.

We find the elements of Dalit life as well as the life of an oppressed Dalit woman. All the factors related to woman's life from Dalit community are reflected in *Sood*. The protagonist of the novella is a young charismatic woman Jaanaki, daughter of murali. She was abused both sexually and verbally. She was exploited by lusty loafers and her own flesh and blood, which creates nausea in her mind. She sought to destroy her womanhood as the only way to escape being degraded by patriarchal dogma. But she tried to subvert the 'self' and wanted to become a rebel against exploitative discriminatory system. In between she met Swami Allakhniranjan with whom she tried to transfer her pain into art and life. Jaanaki eventually found solace through her companionship and love for Swami Allakhniranjan who gave her the courage and philosophy of life. At the novella's end, Jaanaki and Swamiji are reunited in life and death. Resonance of humanism given by Swamiji is reflected in Baburao Bagul's fictional work. Bagul's idea of God is based on Humanism, the principle bestowed by Buddha.

Before looking at Dalit literature with special reference to Jaanaki in *Sood*, it is important to situate the historical and cultural meanings of the terms Subaltern and Hybridity. Although the term subaltern conventionally denotes junior ranking officer in the British Army (OED), the most significant intellectual sources for Spivak's definition of subaltern are the early twentieth-century Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and work of the mainly Indian-based Subaltern Studies collective. In the *Prison Notebooks* written during the time of Mussolini's Fascist government in Italy, Gramsci used the term subaltern interchangeably with 'Subordinate [...] or sometimes *instrument* to denote *[n]on hegemonic groups or classes*' (Gramsci 1978: xiv). Extending the terms of Gramsci's original definition, Ranjit Guha defines subaltern as 'the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and officer or any other way' (Guha 1988: 35). For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, leading contemporary intellectual, the term subaltern is useful because it is flexible; it can accommodate social identities and struggles (Such as woman and the colonised) that do not fall under the

reductive terms of 'strict class analysis'. In the social content of India's rigid class and caste system, the location of the subaltern is further effaced by the layered histories of European Colonialism and National Independence. In response to these changing historical conditions, Spivak has sought to find an appropriate methodology for articulating the histories and struggles of disempowered groups, including peasants and women. Bart Moore -Gilbert contends that:

... More particularly, Spivak's analysis is directed at the subject- position of the female subaltern, whom she describes as doubly marginalized by virtue of relative economic disadvantage and gender subordination (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 80).

Spivak's clearest investigations of 'Third World' subaltern women's resistance are often seen in her engagements with literary texts. In *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern*, Spivak suggests that literary texts can provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of subaltern women. Invoking the novella of Baburao Bagul's *Sood* based on violence against woman and woman against violence, Bagul charts the struggle, eventual capture and brutal rape of the protagonist, Jaanaki.

The sexual harassment she is subjected to is so traumatic, it is beyond imagination. The male animality and sensuality have created abhorrence for the male sect in her mind. Her mother is a sex worker and she sells her youthful and beautiful daughter to enjoy a life of comfort. The street loafers consider her an easy object of fulfillment to satisfy their lust - knowing she belongs to the Dalit class, where there is no protection. Marriage too doesn't change her life. Her husband and in-laws too force of into the flesh trade. Her family members behave like an animal and impose on her. Jaanaki finds herself in the dregs of hell. Her experience of purgatory is unimaginable. So, can't we say Jaanaki is Gendered or Sexed Subaltern? Where is the space she can speak? Isn't she victim of patriarchal violence of subaltern woman? Is there any scope from where she can speak? Therefore, Spivak argues that, therein no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. (Spivak 1988: 307)

Spivak further concludes that the subaltern can't speak because the voice and agency of subaltern women are so embedded in Hindu patriarchal codes of moral conduct and the British colonial representation of subaltern women as victims of a barbaric Hindu culture that

they have to recover. Thus, the pathetic condition of subaltern woman in the society is presented here.

In the case of cultural identities, hybridity refers to the fact that cultures are not discrete phenomena; they are always in contact with one another, and contact leads to cultural “mixed-ness”. Hybridity in, *In The Location of Culture*,(1994), a collection of Dr. Homi Bhabha’s most important essays, creates a series of concepts that work to undermine the simple polarization of the world into self and other. As the most famous example of these concepts, Bhabha’s writing emphasizes the hybridity of cultures, which on one level simply refer to the mixed ness, or even ‘impurity’ of cultures- so long as we don’t imagine that any culture is really pure. This term refers to the original mixed ness within every form of identity (Huddart 2006: 6 - 7).

Contemporary culture is hybrid, just like colonial culture. The idea of hybridity usefully characterizes the mechanisms of the colonial psychic economy. In the same way as the structures of colonial identity can also be found in contemporary contexts, the structure of hybridity is also found in contemporary cultures. The important point to recognize is that cultures are always retrospective constructions, meaning that they are consequences of historical process. Accordingly, when we come to study hybridity, we need appropriate critical forms.

Many literary writers have taken an interest in expressing hybrid cultural identities and using hybrid cultural forms - for example Baburo Bagul. Novella *Sood* offers various expressions of a hybrid space very much in the Bhabha idiom. The novella’s celebration of hybridity is given a conclusive expression in Jaanaki, whose surprising realization of her womanhood which paved her the way for Womanism (Walker 1983) through metamorphosis that took place because of colonialism. Here Jaanaki’s cultural hybridity shows different strata of life- style that is Murali on one hand and Dalit on another. It is found that almost all the Muralis are from Dalit community. Hindu custom itself shows that Murali is of the sect of hybridity with different culture. With religious background, Murali is devotee of Lord Khandoba. She is supposed to praise the Lord and remain unmarried throughout life. The caste system made her an ‘object’ to be used and abused by upper caste; rather it was the systematic provision by the then Manuwadi culture for their lust. And this is what reflected

here in *Sood* about Jaanaki. Against religious background, she is a devotee, pure and virtue rewarded, whereas orthodox social set up says that she is a sex worker, impure and wicked. Her identity becomes culturally hybrid at socio-religious level. Social spectrum of Dalit consciousness does not reflect directly towards Jaanaki. Perhaps Jaanaki wants to enhance her 'self' identity in the cultural hybridity. She has no place in power politics as she belongs to mixed-minority hybrid culture. The entire scenario is the reflection of Hindu religion. Therefore, Sharakumar Limbale asked, "How can it be said the novella has Dalit consciousness?" (Limbale 2005: 79) As a result of that *Sood* seems unreal, imaginary and dream-like. Its elaborative details with the text can be seen through some of the evidences in *Sood*.

Dalit community is affixed with caste culture attributed to Hindu religion. A common Dalit lacks the educational as well as socio-economical background available to most people from the so-called 'higher castes'. Dalit people never had a secured life and had no choice but to engage in tasks that were potentially very risky to their life. The 'elite' class and its culture was a very strange and unfamiliar one for Dalit people for centuries together. Jaanaki, a daughter of Murali, is a character from downtrodden society. She is an illiterate, young and beautiful woman. Gangu, Jaanaki's mother is a prostitute as she is poverty- stricken. She becomes greedy and lusty being a sex worker. She is pulled towards a hedonistic life, and forces Jaanaki to follow the same path. Jaanaki becomes a money making machine for her mother and a commodity for lecherous loafers. Gangu's attitude towards Jaanaki is unbelievable. Jaanaki's beauty becomes lethal to Gangu. Following is one of the evidence of how lusty loafers abuse her with vulgar expressions:

'What a tenderly commodity is seen, today'
'Hey Jaanaki, will you give me a chance?'
'How sexy her gaiety is.... never before seen
such shapely seduction too. Want to roll about?'
'Wipe the floor with' 'What folks will mutter?'
Is she from royal blood? Murali's babe.
Who will hear her? (*Sood* 18).

And suddenly these loafers trounce upon her. After some time, she regains consciousness, but feels like a haunted prey. Here Bagul's language has a pictorial quality which he uses to describe Jaanaki's pathetic situation. Readers feel very sorry by reading about Jaanaki's pathetic situation. Her condition was like that of a gazelle being hunted by many wild animals at the same time. Just like the gazelle, who is in search of emancipation but is unable to do so, Jaanaki was a daughter of 'murali' who was defenceless against the oppressor. The oppressors knew that nobody would be able to resist them. They would not even think of the rape of Dalit woman as a moral crime let alone a legal one. Perhaps no rapist considers the caste, class, and creed of his victim. They just think of her as an untouched fragile flower meant for their sexual pleasure only. If Jaanaki would have had royal blood or belonged to a 'high' class/caste, would anybody have dared to hurt her innocent and immature emotions? Moreover it is unfortunate that Jaanaki is boycotted all her life by society. Poverty-stricken Jaanaki's existence belongs to the Dalit Community and it is her elegance and beauty that eventually leads to her downfall. Therefore, M. N. Vankhade says, "Since Jaanaki is a Dalit character she is targetted and made to suffer such inhumanity and humiliation" (*Sood 7*). Most of the time it is seen that Dalit women suffer oppression by people of other 'high castes' in society. This 'high caste' society upholds patriarchy. It means that the cult and the culture made Jaanaki weak, and a commodity, making one wonder if the creator's permits all such an exploitative system, where the society forces her to be a murali who is molested by lusty loafers. The same courageous character Jaanaki rebels and revolts against the orthodox system with full of fury, as seen in her behaviour and language as well. Jaanaki is doubly oppressed as she is a woman and one who belongs to the Dalit community.

Even inter-religious evidence reveals the same ill-will tendency in society which is reflected in the text. Here is an example of Rasool and Jaanaki. He sells Jaanaki, after abuse her for two years, to a leading brothel's lady custodian who is known as 'Naykani'. Her whorehouse is always over crowded by customers from various caste, creed, class, age groups. It is known that, most of the whores come from ghettos, Dalit community. Its main reason is nothing but poverty, exposure from family, low self-esteem and all that negative qualities. Such negativity is hidden systematically, if they possess, in Elite class to maintain social status. Dalit community's life style has much difference from others' which is a very

gaudy. Their attire, colour, dialect, exclusive behaviour and relationship within and without family and society show their culture. Jaanaki's mother-in-law is seen with such above featured highlights. She is a blackish colored, but attractive. Her cut size blouse and tight sari of embroidered border neatly up to waist. She chews a betel leaf, applies lamp black to the eyes, parts the hair crosses. Such a flamboyantly attire and life style represent Dalit people's culture. In support to the above expression Janardhan Waghmare says, "Dalit writer's description is more figurative of a Dalit woman than non-Dalit writer's description for the same" (*Bhagwat* 54). This is the representative example of Dalit woman. Reader can consider the same attire and culture of other Dalit characters, even of Jaanaki. Language and its culture from Dalit give connotations and denotation of any common word. One of the examples given by Daya Pawar in his speech on radio is, here, noted by Dr. Ashok Kelkar: "'Water' is a word common to all. Elite people get its denotation associated with purity. On the contrary, Dalit people get its denotation very negatively, as moss and impurity and a quarrel place. Such feelings awaken in their mind" (*Bhagwat* 53). It shows that one's own perception influences the surroundings. The same way, words like caste, can be taken for granted from *Sood*. Elite people from *Sood*, like Deshmukh, Kulkarni, Patil, Vidyacharan denote their own caste as a status symbol, self honour through their practises respectively. But, all the Dalit characters from the novel denote their own caste, as labour, sweeper, scavenger, skin worker, downtrodden throughout their respective lives. In this way, language matter much more to interpret Elite and Dalit psyche in daily chores.

It's in very obvious that the Dalit dialect in the literature comes from Dalits folk and Dalit writer but not made for aesthetic pleasure. It seems to be difficult to get the typical terms and phrases for non-Dalit reader or writer or critic. In spite of non-Dalit critics' great deal of criticism on Dalit literature, Dalit writers remain dissatisfied. Daya Pawar, in a personal discussion that took place during the 65th all India Marathi Sahitya Sammelan at Kolhapur on 31st January, 1991, said: "Non-Dalit critics neither understand the description of social context in Dalit literature, nor fully grasp the meaning of language. They do not know idioms and phrases. Nor does anyone read in depth. No one ever makes the effort to understand. The critics don't even realise that we live on a different cultural island. They pay

no attention to the distinction between literary writing from imagination and one that is based on lived ideas” (*Limbale* 2007: 111-112).

On other hand, the dark side of the community as a woman is represented by Jaanaki’s mother, Gangu and Jaanaki’s mother-in-law. Gangu’s life is overlapped by sexism and casteism too, very lecherously and greedily. Chronology of the story shows two significant references of her prostitute life. Firstly she goes to Kulkarni (*Sood* 49) and then to Deshmukh for fornication (*Sood* 22). Gangu goes to Deshmukh for a night to dance and giggle. But Jaanaki sees a very next morning Gangu’s cut off nose and bleeding over her head. Immediately she hears the news of Deshmukh’s assassination (*Sood* 22). It can be pointed out that; the reason of this murder is sexism and casteism. Triangle among the three Gangu, Kulkarni and Deshmukh is seen in the affair. Being a whore, she used to go to high class fornicators deliberately. Therefore, she would mint maximum money and enjoy sex. But caste or class crisis might have become quarrelsome issue between Kulkarni and Deshmukh to be claimed for sex with Gangu. That’s why Kulkarni might have killed Deshmukh. It is known that aristocratic families like the Deshmukh, or Kulkarni or Patil keep concubines as a social status from rural areas. Ultimately Dalit woman is harassed through sex though she may be right like Jaanaki or wrong like her mother Gangu.

Baburao Bagul wants to have social revolutions and reformation. If Hindu religion is not responsible for women’s safe existence, identity, honour and status then, why a Dalit woman should remain as a Hindu in her life? So much so that, untouchable woman suffers from hunger, poverty, slavery, sex and what not? Such negativity makes anyone feel oppressed. And then only one sees a quest for metamorphosis with the new-ideology, the cult, and the culture. And that’s why a new religion takes birth like Buddhism. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar presented a new ideology of Buddhism known which threads humanism. Buddha’s ideology preaches non-violence, non-believer in soul and God. His preaching gives “Ashtang Marg or Sikkhapadam” that is eight ways for emancipation of miseries in life. Buddhism paved the way of philanthropy and pious morality to follow the deeds and duties in life. All these above characteristics of Buddhism are reflected in Dalit novelists’ literary work. And same in Baburao Bagul’s *Sood*, where Swamiji preaches as a follower of the Lord Buddha and says, “A Human being is higher than the cult, the creator and the country” (*Sood*

50). Such an esteemed quality of sublimity is imbibed by Baburao Bagul in this work. And that can be considered by any reader to know his worthwhile writing. In support of the above statement, M. N. Vankhade says, “Writers like Baburao Bagul, who are known as an indignant young Dalit and their writing could be compared with Negro writer’s literary work” (*Sood* 7-8).

Dalit novel is basically associated with social commitment. A woman in the Indian social system is supposed as second sex. In spite of feminist and womanist’s devoted work for the betterment of woman, no change in society is found. Moreover, Dalit woman becomes subordinates in the framework of so called “society”, who does not have any social status. Such Dalit women are discriminated and segregated in the society for ages together.

Jaanaki doesn’t want stereotyped culture but it is imposed on her life style. Why? Because it is assumed that cultured values and social status belong to upper caste and society only. A Muslim slaughter, Rasool, ‘kept’ Jaanaki as a mistress for two years and sells her to a sex worker. She is always in contact with one another, and contact leads to cultural mixed -ness. She tries to subvert the ‘self’ and between Swamiji’s companionship and makes again a cultural hybridity in her life. Hindu sage Swamiji preaches her truth of life through social realism. It means that the idea of hybridity usefully characterizes the mechanism of the colonial psyche.

This shows that not only in history but also in literature, minorities in the world are oppressed. They may be Dalit or Black, there seems to be an invisible bond between them. And the invisible bond is called consciousness, which implies one’s own social existence and social relationship. It becomes a centre for Dalit writers and characters.

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