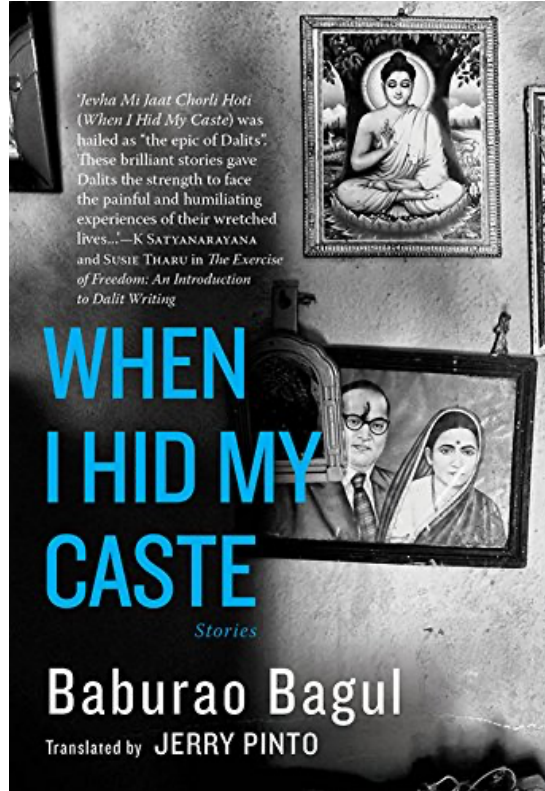


Baburao Bagul. *When I Hid My Caste*, Trans. Jerry Pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt., 2018. 135 pp. ISBN 978-93-86702-92-0.



Marathi literature has contributed immensely to the making of a Dalit literary tradition in India. Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories, *Jevha Mi Jat Chorali (When I Hid My Caste)*, is one of the earliest anthologies of Dalit short stories to be published as part of this tradition. This collection of Marathi stories was published originally in 1963. It upended the sanitised imaginary worlds of mainstream Marathi literature by documenting the segregated lives of outcastes in Maharashtra and the everyday forms of violence such communities had to undergo. Practices of motherhood, sex work, child abuse, child labour, illiteracy, unemployment, social alienation, and manual scavenging are salvaged from their condescending Savarna interpretations and retold from a Dalit male perspective. Bagul's stories impart legitimacy to Dalit articulations, condemn the pasts and presents of caste violence and ensure vitality to the anti-caste cause. Its singular narration of practices of untouchability along with stories of

resilience and revolt from the standpoint of a Marathi Dalit male writer makes it a significant addition to Indian literature.

Although English translations of individual Marathi Dalit writers had begun appearing in weeklies and journals in and outside Pune in the 1970s itself, it took another two decades for anthologies of Dalit literature to get published. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature* (1992), a collection of poems, stories and articles by Dalits in English translation may be considered the first comprehensive compilation of an alternative literary tradition in Indian literature. The act of translating Indian languages into English in pre-independent India entailed the dissemination of Oriental images of India to a Eurocentric Western audience along with the augmentation of the narrative of the “White Man’s Burden.” The publication of translations of subaltern texts brought in a definitive shift from its former colonial overtones. Instead of recovering and legitimising a classical Sanskrit past as the essence of India, translation as a practice went through a reinvention that allowed it to accommodate the articulations of caste lives. *Poisoned Bread*, an archive of Dalit poetry, stories, autobiographical excerpts, essays, and speeches, facilitated their afterlives in syllabi, literary studies, researches, and histories of Indian literature. Jerry Pinto’s translation of Bagul’s *When I Hid My Caste* is a timely translation of an early Marathi Dalit male literary tradition—a tradition of the literature of revolt in Indian Literature.

Baburao Bagul’s concept of (Dalit) literature drew inspiration from Ambedkarism and communism, two philosophies Bagul came across during his life in the Matunga Labour camp, Mumbai. Bagul believed that “democratic socialism, the new science and technology, the revolutionary present,” (*Poisoned Bread*, 293) constituted the essence of Dalit literature. Bagul believed that only Dalit literature had the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. He wrote against the established literature of India, which according to him was Brahminical in spirit. His writings stormed into the sanitised agraharas of Hindu Marathi literature and jolted their unquestioned casteist supremacy. They aroused a generation of Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014) and Arun Kamble (1953-2009). Organisations like Dalit Panthers led to the revival of Ambedkerite philosophy, at times militant, in the 1970s. This early phase of Dalit literature described as a literature of revolt underscored the importance of social equality over political equality in various ways apart from its polemic mode of narration.

Bagul’s stories profile men born in lower caste communities who rise in revolt against various discriminations in the society. “Prisoner of Darkness” narrates how Daulat, the abandoned, illegitimate son of Banoo, is enraged at the public molestation of his mother and saves her. “Bohada” depicts the rebellious Mahar youth represented by Damu, who defies the unwritten rules of his village by playing the role of Narasimha in a ritual Bohada where Mahars are not

allowed to participate. “Dassehra Sacrifice” narrates the triumphant attempt of four men belonging to the Mahar community to tame a bull as part of a ritual. “Pesuk” is about one of India’s revolutionaries reminiscing the traumatic life of a lower caste woman he had met. He narrates his utter shock at how the woman avenged her abusive husband by committing Sati.

Stories like “Revolt” and “When I Hid my Caste” narrate how educated lower caste men, who nurture desires of revolting against caste, are rendered helpless due to their lower caste status. Jaai, the graduate in “Revolt,” is forced to continue manual scavenging, his caste occupation. The narrator of “When I Hid my Caste” is a Mahar who introduces himself as “a graduate of the University of Revolution” but has to hide his caste to get a job. The story “Gangster” recounts the impacts of hostile neighbourhoods on Dalit males, making them insensitive to humane feelings of love and tenderness. The “iron coloured” in the story returns to his home in Mumbai after years of gangster life in Hongkong only to find himself amid a funeral rite of an aged woman who could also be his mother.

Bagul’s women are victims of casteist patriarchy and social violence. Women characters subjected to sexual slavery recur in many of these stories. The economically dependent Dalit woman amplifies the dire consequence of rampant casteism. The story “Pesuk” is based on a social system that forces a Dalit woman to submit to the whims and fancies of Hindu males and then excommunicates her for living immorally while the polygamous upper-caste husband continues to be venerated and held in esteem. Motherhood is another abiding concern in these stories. Motherhood is not a romanticised feeling to cherish for the women in Bagul’s stories. It is a state of being into which they are hurled as a consequence of being born in a lower caste community. They are bound by the unwritten laws of caste to give themselves off to Hindu males when hounded by poverty, beauty, or customary obligation.

Motherhood is a predicament that is often unwilling for but imposed on women by way of rape, marital or otherwise. “Prisoner of Darkness” profiles a consort-mother who had to abandon her biological son, enter into a relationship with the upper caste landlord, earn the hatred of her community and finally get sexually assaulted by her husband’s son soon after his cremation. “Streetwalker” narrates the experience of a mother, who is compelled to take up sex work for a livelihood. The story also details the exploitation of women engaged in this work, as she is swindled off her hard-earned money and fails to save her ailing son from imminent death. “Monkey” portrays the assaults a woman has to face in her own house from her husband and mother-in-law. This story embodies a mother who is a partner in domestic violence by instigating her son to manhandle his wife. The scandalous mother image appears in many other stories of Bagul like “Mother” and “Sood.”

Bagul's women collapse under the hangover of generations of casteist and patriarchal savagery. Their memories of possible everyday resilience and recreation are toned down for the sake of narrating tales of casteist violence. The pulsating histories of politically conscious Dalit women and their stories of survival give way to poignant narratives of victimhood arising partly from the necessity of documenting the destitution of Dalit lives in a hostile environment. Sharmila Rege, Meenakshi Moon, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar, and many others have documented various forms of Dalit women's participation in the anti-caste movement in India. The mobilisation of women at Mahad, their participation in the conference of the Scheduled Caste Federation as early as the 1940s, their Satyagraha against the Pune Pact (1932), the formation of Dalit Mahila Federation, and the construction of Buddhist Mahila Mandals are some of the interventions by women in the period from the 1920s to the 1940s as mentioned in Sharmila Rege's "Afterword" to Urmila Pawar's autobiography in English translation *The Weave of My Life* (2017).

The memories of caste abuse and resilience in Baburao Bagul's world of fiction are picked from a world as perceived by a male bound by patriarchy. However, the articulation of these worlds is significant as they present a pertinent critique of a monistic understanding of Marathi literature. These stories based on the lives of politicised Dalits also contest a literary tradition referred to as "Indian" literature and its representations of Dalits as apolitical and naïve entities.

Shyma P
Payyanur College, Kannur University
Email: p.shyma@gmail.com