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Precarious Masculinities and Impossible Motherhood in Baburao Bagul's "Mother"

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Abstract

The construction of the trope of the Dalit female in the literary and cultural narratives as the most disenfranchised entity of the social ladder is not without its foundational truths. This paper deals with the concept of Dalit patriarchy and how it relates to Brahmanical patriarchy as a co-constitutive category and not an antithetical category. It looks at the formation of Dalit masculinities and femininities in the larger patriarchal narrative through an analysis of Baburao Bagul's "Mother" that deals with the representation of Dalit woman, especially the construction of motherhood. As a theoretical framework, the paper critically looks at and applies V. Geetha's concept of Dalit patriarchy in its analysis.

Keywords: Dalit, masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, motherhood

Literature as a representational category talks about the social, cultural and discursive practices of the society and problematizes it. The movement or mobility of people is not a novel concept but underneath its commonplaceness lies a nexus of power and politics that is largely negotiated by the caste, class, ethnic and gender locations of an individual, especially in the Indian society. These power structures allow and control various mobilities and their related immobility. In this context, it would be prescient to site Mimi Sheller's notion of mobility justice in the everyday practices of social mobility. She opines (2020) that differential or uneven experiences of movement across social and cultural terrains occur due to differences in access, means and availability of routes and pathways. Although her work pertains to urban geography, I argue in this paper that differences in social mobility, especially in the case of Dalit women are caused due to their location in the nexus of gender-class-caste marginalisation, due to the grand narratives of patriarchy controlled by the heteronormative upper caste men as well as women. This paper especially critically looks at the concept of 'Dalit Patriarchy' as put forward by V. Geetha in this context and tries to locate the representation of Dalit women as well as the formations of Dalit masculinities in the cultural narrative within the subcontinent and in order to argue this point, analyses Baburao Bagul's short story "Mother", especially in terms of the construction of the Dalit mother figure and her social mobility.

Baburao Bagul's short story "Mother" is a complex narrative which puts forward many layers of Dalit gender behaviour, of Dalit masculinity and femininity as co-constituted by the larger framework of the Brahmanical patriarchy. The story begins with Pandu and his classmates reading a poem about the ideal mother as 'Vatsalya Sindhu' and as he imagines his mother, he relaxes his social anxiety for a while:

The heavy burden he always carried on his shoulders lifted somewhat and he was a child once again, wanting to shout, to run and wave his arms about in joy. The hostility that he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play, and a benign smile slowly came to his face. (pg.183)

The story shows how Pandu's own Dalit masculinity is formed inside the school that acts as a microcosm of the society, with the children taunting and victimising Pandu based on his mother's

perceived sexual promiscuity: “Kisan yelled cruelly, ‘Don’t touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says Pandu’s mother sleeps with the *mukadam* like this...’” (pg. 183). There are two noticeable strands here in the formation of Pandu’s masculinity: his masculine identity is slowly getting shaped in juxtaposition to his mother’s Dalit female sexuality. Also, the second thing to note here is the complicity of the other women of the locality, such as Kisan’s mother, in building and sustaining the narrative of Brahmanical patriarchy, the trope of the Dalit woman as a hypersexualised entity. Pandu’s oppression and his classmates’ privilege and social superiority is caste-based and class-dictated, because he is an orphan and his mother works for a living, unlike most mothers of the neighbourhood. Pandu’s own emasculation thus begins from a very young age as he is torn between his love for his mother, his yearning for her presence, which is bereft because she needs to work incessantly due to her underprivileged class location and the barbs that construct the mute disgust and hatred in Pandu’s subconscious for his mother. He tries to uphold his mother’s honour but is bullied violently and by brutish force along with insults such as ‘pimp’. The abusive gestures of his classmates make him burn with shame and anger, and that is where his own violent masculinity begins to form:

He felt a demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murdered them all in cold blood. It was good to think of them lying together in a pool of blood. It was short-lived joy, however. He was afraid that Dagdu, their neighbour, would pick another fight with his mother, try to strip off her sari... rage gave way to infinite helplessness and he felt spent (pg. 184).

Pandu’s anger and confusion also arise from his observations of his mother’s apparent nonchalance during his mealtime, her apparent lack of adequate ‘motherly’ care and her attention to her own appearance, which speaks of the society’s denial of the mother as a woman, a female subject entitled to care for own well-being:

My mother has certainly changed, she is not the mother of old. ... she was so, so late; and when she did come she didn’t say a word to me, never kissed me once. She went straight to cook, served me supper silently, and then went to bed like a small child, talking to herself, smiling quietly to herself. She didn’t sit by me when I ate, didn’t ask me how I was. ... she bathed early in the morning, wore a new sari and blouse, and then sat holding the mirror in front of her for hours. She turned the mirror around and looked at herself from all angles (pg. 185).

This shows that even though Pandu’s mother was economically independent, she wasn’t independent from the tropes of motherhood that denied her the subjectivity of womanhood and narrowed her role to “*Vatsalya Sindhu*” in Pandu’s eyes, robbing her of an alternate subject position. The act of caring for her own appearance over his own is seen by Pandu, and by extension the society, as an act of selfishness which goes against the narrative of the selfless mother and establishes her as a promiscuous woman in his and the society’s eyes. It promotes the thoughts of “shame and dishonour” in him that fight with his own misery because he cannot share his confusion and helplessness with anyone for the fear that people “would start abusing his mother in front of him”. His emasculation is highlighted by the use of the phrase “impotent rage” that fills him up and that he keeps suppressed, his childhood robbed “as the murderous fires continued to haunt him...” As his mother hurries home to serve him food, she observes the doubt in Pandu’s eyes and it reminds her of her husband, “he seemed to her like his cruel, alcoholic, deceitful father”, and her movements to and from home observed and monitored by the entire street, the boundaries between her private and public spaces blurred with impunity:

The entire street was transfixed by her undulating walk. The men stripped her bare in their mind’s eye, the women burned with envy, but couldn’t help looking (pg. 186).

V. Geetha (2017) argues that “Dalit women- always in the forefront of the rural economy, providers and workers in their families, and fighting to educate their children, and to affirm their self-respect in a violent and mean-spirited caste society- find that their attempts to lead a life of dignity and equality are met with rancour and violence”(n.p). She uses the term “*Dalit Patriarchy*” to highlight a form of patriarchy wherein the male members of the Dalit community that are exploited by the upper castes because of their caste location, perpetrate gender violence within their households to mask their inability to protect their women from the predation of the upper classes: “ A notable feature of the exploitation of Dalits has been the humiliation of Dalit men: in the course of the power that upper-caste men exert

over their labour, they also taunt them about their masculinity. They claim that Dalit men can never hope to protect their women, who are ‘easy prey’ by upper caste men. Such symbolic ‘emasculated’ of the Dalit men results in their feeling beleaguered in specifically gendered ways, which results in their exerting prowess in their families” (excerpt from Patriarchy, quoted in Arya and Rathore, 2020: 61).

Manuela Ciotti in her essay “Dalit Women between Social and Analytical Alterity” (2014: 305, in *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*) talks about the trope of the Dalit woman in the cultural narrative:

Dalit Woman has almost no equal in the repertoire of tropes that have emerged from the study of Indian society. ‘She’ embodies the quintessentially marginalised and disenfranchised- a subject almost exclusively constituted through multiple and simultaneous forms of subjugation, exploitation and violence. These are direct and indirect consequences of her ‘untouchable’ background (2014:305).

Thus, even within the boundaries of a specific geographical location, her experiences are not the same predicated upon the multi-fold subjection (Ciotti 2014:306) as is the case with Pandu’s mother in this story, and the violence with which this subjugation takes place robs not only the women of their social agency but also through this robbing persecutes the male members of their community.

However, as Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore (2020: 14-15) argue the origin of this kind of violence within the patriarchal family units is not very different from other families and that all women to a greater or lesser extent, especially Dalit women, suffer from the contours of violence created by Brahmanical patriarchal norms: “Brahmanical patriarchy does not refer to the patriarchy followed by and perpetuated by brahmin men. Rather, it represents the multiform nature of patriarchy-cum-caste in India, not necessarily perpetrated by Brahmins or even by men. Brahmanical patriarchy explains a specific kind of patriarchy by explicating a set of discriminatory levels, which is unique to the context of the Indian subcontinent.” They argue that the logic of Dalit patriarchy therefore needs to be rebranded as ‘Dalit manifestations of Brahmanical patriarchy’ (Arya and Rathore, 2020:15). Hence, the subaltern caste woman is hypersexualised and despite her ‘untouchability’ made available to both the dominant class male as well as Dalit male as sexual objects. This speaks to the convenient non-isomorphism of the gender relations across caste lines constructed by the Brahmanical patriarchy, of which the *mukadam* in this story is a representative.

When the woman becomes the provider and earns the money to run the family, the male person of the family, the traditional bread-winner, becomes emasculated as in the case of this story. So, Pandu’s father who cannot earn a living due to tuberculosis, suspects that his wife must be selling her body to earn the money and he attempts to deface her to make her repulsive to the general society and thereby exercise his hegemonic masculinity within the domestic sphere while being emasculated in the slum locality of a metropolis. His suspicion is a result of the social constructions of the Dalit woman which speaks of the ambivalence in attitudes with regards to the woman’s location: she needs to be placed both at the centre of the home as a care giver and due to her economic location, needs to be the provider and economic wage earner in her family. I argue that this ambivalence, that is constructed by her gender, caste and class subjectivities, makes her a uniquely disempowered entity. However, she gets her revenge in using her sexuality to take her conjugal rights from her husband and thereby hastens his death. However, she has to be her young son’s sole provider as she works to raise her son for these ten years, after which the story is temporally located. Her widowhood brings her additional grief. She now is bereft of the protection that having a husband provides her and as she traverses the social space of her locality each day between her home and her place of work, she is hyper-sexualised and constantly ogled by the neighbourhood men as merely a sexual being and vilified by the women as a whore:

She had suffered immeasurable torment after his death. Men were drawn to her; she did not want them. They tried rape and their women waged a war of slander against her (pg. 188).

At the end of the story, when he sees his mother in the arms of the *mukadam*, the overseer, Pandu’s suspicions materialize and he runs away from home repulsed by his mother’s promiscuity. He is too young to understand and decode the complexities of his mother’s impossible position, and herein lies

the society's culpability in over-generalising the patriarchal narrative. There are two constructs of the woman available in this story- the cultural construct of the mother as “Vatsalya Sindhu”- a river of motherly love and benediction” which points to the patriarchal tendency of homogenising and placing the woman in her bio-social role of motherhood, a self-less care-giver, which is very monolithic and uniform, which denies her the subjectivity of a feminine sexual being or any other mode of being. Pandu’s mother is the mother-figure at home but as soon as she leaves the peripheries of her home and enters the social space of the locality, she becomes his provider and a sexual object subject to the male gaze of the society. Pandu’s mother struggles to bridge this gap between these two conceptions of her being in both Pandu’s imagination and that of her neighbourhood. She struggles with her own loneliness and chafes against her own sexuality, which forces her to give in to the Overseer’s firm bear-like grasp at the end. However, as soon as she sees her son’s horrified glance, she tries to get out of the Overseer’s arms and rush to explain to her son, to rescue him as it were, but her lack of social agency prevents her from doing either. She falls a mute victim to her social construction. Pandu’s emasculation, on the other hand, like a Dalit man’s is cyclical like his father. He occupies the same position of suspicion as his father and his mother is doubly victimised both at the hands of the father and the son.

Thus, this story shows how patriarchy reproduces caste and gender identities through the bio-social control of the reproductive site of the female body. This biological caste is reproduced and reaffirmed within the social practices in the social space within which both the Dalit woman and man operate. It would be simplistic to consider that the gendered construction of Dalit men and women are different. As the story itself shows, Pandu’s social and gendered identity is constantly being framed against his mother’s social behaviour and vice-versa, just like his father’s was. So, while the upper caste women fall within the Brahmanical trope of ‘purity’, the Dalit woman is represented as a hypersexualised being, her body being the site of gender, caste as well as class violence. Thus, V.Geetha’s use of the term ‘Dalit Patriarchy’ to describe the precarity of Dalit women is not entirely misrepresented. However, it has to be realized that Dalit patriarchy is not a separate entity unto itself; it operates within the bounds of Brahmanical patriarchy that constructs the different tiered systems of oppression to retain power within a select group, sustained both by male and female participants in a social space.

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