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CONTENT

Impact of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model on Language Anxiety among 9th Grade (CBSE) Students Santhosh Albert Saldanha and Dr. Vijayalakshmi Naik	3
A Study on Learning Styles in Relation to Academic Achievement in Science of Class VIII Students Vidhyashree P. and Dr. Seema P. V.	11
A Study of Learner Autonomy of Research Students in Relation their Supervisory Style Mrs. Bhavna Panchal and Dr. Shefali Pandya	19
Exploring the effect of Parental Involvement on Academic Stress among Students Dr. Cerena Aurin D'Cunha	31
Exploring the Effectiveness of Technology-Assisted Instruction in Teaching Cell Structure Dr. Hema Bhadawkar and Ms. Mahalaxmi Pillai	40
Effectiveness of Wellbeing on Academic Performance of Students Dr. Archana Bhople	48
Challenges and Needs of the 21st Century Education Archana V Katgeri	57
Effectiveness of Leadership Management Module in enhancing Communication Skills among B.Ed. Students Ms. Dharti Latke	66
A Study of Resilience Intervention Programme for Development of Emotional Intelligence of Secondary School Students Ms Ranjeeta Gomes and Prof. Dr. Sunayana Kadle	74
Cutting- Edge Solutions and Reforms for Teaching Learning Transformations Mrs. Jyoti Ashish Vasavada and Dr. Pratiksha Modi	83
A Study on the Attitude Towards Quality Education in India Chriselle Fernandes	94
Exploring Avenues to Empower Students and Adults through Qualitative Improvement in Education Dr. Bhanu Seshadri	101

Effectiveness of Digital Learning Tools in Fostering Personalised Learning, Co-operative Learning and Academic Achievement among Secondary School Students Bhakti Gunesh Sawant	111
Enhancing Educational Outcomes: The Influence of AI -Enhanced Learning on Metacognitive Abilities Among B.Ed. Students Ms. Athira S R and Dr. Reni Francis	123
Role of ICT in 21st - Century Skills and Enhancing Learning Dr. Vithoba C. Sawant	131
From Theory to Practice: Integrating Bandura's Theory for Addressing Empathy Gaps Dr. Rupal Thakkar and Shezadi Khan	139
Hybrid Mode of Learning -The Ideal Pedagogy for Future Generation Mrs. Kayani Arumugam and Dr. Reni Francis	150
Improving Education with STEAM: Implementation, Benefits, and Challenges Ms. Achala Bhor and Dr. Mary George Varghese	156
Diagnosing the Female: Madness, Gender, and Narrative Authority in <i>Manichithrathazhu</i> and <i>Athiran</i> Niyas S.M.	161
The Grim Reality of the Dalit Mother in Baburao Bagul's 'Aai' (Mother) Dr. Kishor N. Ingole	177

The Grim Reality of the Dalit Mother in Baburao Bagul's 'Aai' (Mother)

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Abstract

While depicting Dalit women, Bagul considers not only untouchability but also the customs, traditions, beliefs, and superstitions inherent in rural life. Women are not exempt from these influences. By nature, women tend to be more faithful and superstitious. However, his stories repeatedly demonstrate how these very tendencies cause their suffering and ultimate ruin. Consequently, their misery becomes boundless. The root of Dalit suffering lies in human nature and an unjust social system built on inequality. While examining various dimensions of Dalit life, Baburao Bagul's stories analyze these profound sorrows—including the injustices inflicted by upper castes, the poverty resulting from untouchability, and the hardships caused by human nature and behavior. Dalits faced many struggles and difficulties in their marginalized condition. In this paper, the researcher has tried to find out the grim reality of the Dalit mother in 'Aai' (Mother), a Marathi short story by Baburao Bagul, a pioneer of Marathi Dalit literature. Particularly, the writer of this article wishes to focus on the character of the Dalit women who are ill-treated by the society at large and their family.

Keywords: Dalit, emancipation, empathetic, grim, mother, reality, woman

Introduction

Baburao Ramji Bagul, born in 1930, is a prominent Marathi figure in Maharashtra, India. He is also a pioneer of modern literature in Marathi and a crucial personality in the Indian short story in the late 20th century. Baburao Bagul is a powerful and talented personality in Dalit literature. He contributed to various literary genres, including short stories, poetry, novels, and

ideological essays. Furthermore, his literary criticism was highly thought-provoking and played a pivotal role in guiding Dalit literature, ultimately altering the course of mainstream Marathi literature. Initially, he wrote a few poems, but witnessing people living in extreme inequality triggered a revolutionary consciousness within his sensitive mind. The suffering he experienced in life has taken the form of rebellion in his poetry. However, when he felt that poetry was insufficient to capture this depth, he turned his hand to the short story genre. He is well known for his works such as *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli* (1963), *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (1969), *Sahitya Ajache Kranti Vigyan*, and *Sud* (1970). He wrote numerous stories in magazines. It receives interest from Marathi readers. In 1963, his first collection of stories, *Jevha Mi Jat Chorali* (When I Had Concealed My Caste), fashioned an incentive in Marathi literature with its hot-blooded representation of an obscene society. It has become the new impetus to modern writings. His poem, *Akar* (Shape), became popular in literature in 1967. He raised his voice for Dalit writing, though his many masterpieces became more breathtaking with his second collection of short stories, *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Getting Cheaper).

His writing became a great voice for generations. He has been created as a millstone in the Dalit writings in India. This cements his position as an important, enlightened voice for many generations. This honors him with the 'Harinarayan Apte Award' by the Government of Maharashtra. He remained deeply inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. His fictional work finds the reflection of Karl Marx and Jyotiba Phule. He publishes his tribute to the ideology of Panther, known as the Manifesto of Panther, in 1972. The modern literary conference took place in Mahad this year. His writing is an inspiration for an everlasting generation of Dalit authors. His short story titled *Mother* represents the voice of a lower-caste Dalit woman. He throws light upon the dual discrimination faced by Dalit women, how they are doubly marginalized along the lines of gender and caste, thereby exposing realistic experiences of the Dalit community. Baburao Bagul's

collection of short stories portrays the realities of rural and Dalit women. Once, Dr. Ambedkar advised Dalit writers: “Don't use your pen to solve your questions. Use to remove the darkness in villages. Never forget that in our country there is a large world of marginalized Dalits. Understand well their agony and pain. Strive through your literature to enrich their life.” (Nimbalkar, 2006, pp. 32–33)

Baburao Bagul's stories represent the experiences of an individual and community, especially his/her battle against situations of deprivation, humiliation, and displacement; struggle for survival; wretched acquiescence; and, at times, open mutiny. This research examines how women's struggles challenge established social, economic, political, and religious structures. All the stories in the collection are a powerful projection of the crude, hideous, and dreadful society that has not been presented in Marathi literature until now and have stirred up the sensitive readers.

The Emancipation of Dalit Women: The short story 'Mother' is a voiceless, suffering, painful, and worthless effort and voice of all women in the society. The story revolves around a young, lower-caste Dalit widow and her son Pandu, who faced a painful lifestyle in their days. Their life is turned into suffering and unhappiness because their relationship is spoilt when the upper-caste people exploit the innocence of the child by poisoning his mind against his mother. Mother has lived her whole life for her son, but Pandu has failed to report to his mother in his life. The story depicts the mother's painful journey, her endless sacrifices, and her lifelong struggles.

The story has focused through Pandu's perspective, especially in the initial sections. His emotional deterioration, tracing a path from initial disorientation and intense humiliation to violent anger, is central. However, this male-centered focalization initially presents the mother through the lens of societal gossip and accusations. The narrative also introduced the moments of explicit male gazing from the community: Her swaying stride captivated the entire street. Men undressed her

with their eyes, and envious women found it impossible to look away. (Bagul, 2000, p. 415) This phrase highlights the objectification of the mother; her body effectively becomes public property, subjected to the mental violation of men and the judgment of women. Through the complexities of gender, violence, and caste, Baburao Bagul has focused on the life of Mother and her son, Pandu. The father is suffering with tuberculosis, so the entire pressure of the family is on Mother. Her husband lives in his perpetual drunken state; her living conditions become worse, and her son Pandu abuses her verbally, physically, and emotionally, as he suspects her of infidelity. Her husband's attempts to scar her show how deeply he holds onto male dominance. He tried to make her unattractive because he felt entitled to control her body. The need to conquer, control, and confine a woman's body is a way of asserting male privilege on women. Improving the status of Dalit women requires Dalit men to recognize and support their value. The first and foremost struggle of Dalit women is to live within the boundaries of their families. Educated Dalit men often struggle to accept the liberation of Dalit women, preferring to confine them to household labor. While drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* these women exist as true subalterns. They are doubly oppressed by both caste and domestic patriarchy, leaving them unable to speak. (Spivak, 1996, p. 104)

Pandu was a small, school-going boy. In class, the teacher taught a poem about mothers. Inspired by the poem's description of a mother as the embodiment of love and an ocean of affection, he truly began to see his mother as "Vatsalya Sindhu Aai" (the ocean of motherly love). He began to feel her greatness. The persistent worry in his mind floated away like a feather, yet its departure forced him to confront the heavy, unbearable grief of his broken childhood. He felt all the children in the class were his friends. Pandu burst out laughing. The other boys started mocking him, and the classroom turned into a chaotic scene. Amidst the chaos, one boy taunted that Pandu's mother was a woman of loose character who was living with a foreman (mukadam).

He said, “My mother frequently remarks on the reputational indiscretions of Pandya's mother, noting that she currently resides as Foreman's mistress.” (Ingole & Padmavat, 2023, p. 37).

Pandu's face burns with a helpless, lethal rage. He envisions slaughtering the boys, but the fantasy shatters against a brutal reality: he is fatherless, and his mother stands entirely alone. He is afraid to remember Dagdu, who fights with his mother and tries to strip her of her sari. The repeated comments convince him of his mother's guilt; like a puff of air, his anger vanishes, and he involves himself in thinking about the changes he experienced in his mother's conduct. Blinded by public gossip about his mother, he abandons his home forever. The helpless mother finally becomes a victim of Foreman's lust.

Deeply hurt and enraged, Pandu's anger boiled over. He was hit with the painful realization that he was essentially an orphan. “... His mother is no longer the same. Despite waiting for her so much last night, she did not come early. She came and started working without saying a word. Somehow she made curry and bread; she served and spread it on her bed like a child and fell asleep talking to herself. She did not say “eat.” She did not say, “Take more of it.” It was the same in the morning. She had bathed early in the morning, wearing a new sari and bodice, and was sitting holding a mirror in front of her face. She was continually revolving the mirror around the face. Continually she was moving her hands from the face and cheeks. She was throwing off the shoulders a silver chain around the neck, and a new one, a black texture of gold beads, was making its way down. She was curling up on her bosom. She was pulling the hem of the bodice, the upper part of the bosom. She was untying the knot of the bodice, and again she was tying it.” (Ingole & Padmavat, 2023, p. 38) It reveals a change in her routine, perceived by Pandu. When she left, the neighbors—both men and women—were speaking very ill of her. Pandu was listening to all of this. Seeing the relationship between his mother and the foreman (mukadam), a sense of anger and disgust grew in his heart towards his mother, and he began to hate her intensely. He started

humiliating her. Pandu's mother constantly yearns for her son to accept and call her "mother." This situation forces her into a difficult choice between her son and the foreman, reflecting her deep inner turmoil.

The author also sheds light on how Dalit children are constantly marginalized and discriminated against even in school by the upper caste; they don't have any space to understand their value and individualistic experiences. When the upper-caste boys label Pandu's mother as a prostitute, Pandu too begins to scrutinize her chastity. Caught in the midst of patriarchy and a casteist mindset, she sacrifices herself to provide her son a better life. Societal systems and familial structures entrap Dalit women in a cycle of endless oppression, creating severe barriers to their emancipation.

Conflict between a Woman's Natural Emotions and Her Motherhood

The emotional story of 'Aai' (Mother) never fades from the minds of readers. This story depicts a profound conflict between a woman's natural emotions and her motherhood. Out of this conflict, this story was born. Pandu felt that his mother was changed. She could see the same 'dark suspicion' of her husband in the eyes of Pandu. Even as she was persuading him to wear the new clothes, Pandu vented his disgust at her—"Put on your grave! An immoral Harlot" (Ingole & Padmavat, 2023, p. 45) and ran out of the house. This came as a shocker for her. She started cursing her fate. She became more hurt by Pandu's words than by her husband's. She thinks that the past is revisiting her. At the end, the internal monologue of the mother reveals her suffering. This is a powerful articulation of her lack of agency and the collective oppression she faces. When Pandu left the house, she started muttering to herself, "Look, kid, you've disgraced me. You have made me suffer more than your father. Has God made me sad? You, your father, and the men and women of the colony tortured me. I suffered a lot for you and your father. When he died, Mohammed Mestri was ready to put his motor in my name to get me married. Waljishet used to

send twenty-twenty rupees from the hand of Thakumami. This Dagdya was ready to deposit his whole service fund in my name. But I sacrificed my life for your nurture. But you decided not to talk to me. You started to move away. You began to accept my criticism as true. Last Diwali, Dagdya tried to molest me. If you considered me a mother, I would not have done this. I had your support. But you left me alone. (Ingole & Padmavat, 2023, p. 46) She relives the period immediately after the death of her husband. She had offers from many men, but she refused all of them. She had turned down all the offers for the sake of Pandu, her child. And he called her a harlot. When she was thinking about all these things, a deep sense of peace washed over her. She heard a knock. She anticipates Pandu's return. But it is the foreman. He takes her in his arms. Even as she yields to his embrace and her own overwhelming desires, she fails to hear her child's faint cry of, "Mother!" Pandu had seen her in the tight embrace of the foreman. He rushes out of the house. She tries to follow him, but the foreman pulls her back into the room. She tried to free herself from "the embrace of the foreman" (Ingole & Padmavat, 2023, p. 47), but in vain. For her, Pandu was the only goal and hope of her life. But Pandu's running away means the collapse of her world. She stands at a critical life crossroads.

Pandu is unable to handle the love she bestowed upon him after so many months and refuses to answer. Abuses and the awkwardness make him feel more disgusted towards his mother, and he runs out of the house, calling her a harlot. Since the death of her husband, all those years she had lived the life of a widow, though she was proposed to by many men who were wealthy and could have provided her everything for a happy life. As Chitra Sinha writes in her essay *Images of Motherhood: The Hindu Code Bill Discourse in India*, "The identity of motherhood thus completely overshadowed all other identities of Indian women, and as a result, the Indian woman was raised in a culture that trained her to be an ideal mother from early childhood." (Sinha, 2010, p. 21) She sacrificed her happiness for Pandu, hoping that when he grew up he would support her

and her sufferings would come to an end. As a widow, she spent ten long years loving Pandu. She lived only for him until the foreman came along last year. Ever since she lost her husband, she has given her all for him, and now this son has turned against her. She starts crying helplessly. The foreman hugs her, and her unfulfilled ten years' desires make her respond to him. She is so overwhelmed by it that she does not even hear her son's timid knock and cry for her. Pandu, heartbroken, runs out of the house. Once she realised what was happening, she tried to run out and stop her son, but the foreman blocked her way. She tries desperately to break free, but like a person stuck in a quagmire, she finds release impossible.

Conclusion

Baburao Bagul's short story 'Mother' is an empathetic portrayal of a woman's struggle against patriarchal cruelty, sexual objectification, and class oppression. The story interrogates the sanctity of "motherhood" in a society where poverty, widowhood, and female beauty automatically become grounds for moral suspicion and abuse. The story ends with a note of despair and helplessness in the life of a liberated, illiterate Dalit woman. The truthful reflection of social exclusion, lack of effective legal protection, and socio-economic and cultural exploitation has kept the Dalits in sub-human living conditions for centuries. Nowadays, many among the younger generation are able to make better lives for themselves through education and job reservation provided by the Constitution of India. Baburao Bagul portrayed the harsh realities of an uneducated Dalit widow's life. He shows the struggles of women in his works. His stories show the external as well as internal conflict faced by the Dalit women. Bagul portrays the fall as well as the rise of women characters and depicts them as their own selves honestly.

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