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A Study of New Aesthetics in “When I Hid My Caste” by Baburao Bagul

A Research Paper by:

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Abstract: “When I Hid My Caste” is the title story of the anthology containing ten stories in all, written originally in Marathi by Baburao Bagul and translated into English by Jerry Pinto. It is the last story in the mentioned anthology. It is a Dalit short story which explores new dimensions of aesthetics which pave the way to new kind of criticism in the realm of Dalit Literature. There are many Dalits who have hidden their caste identity and have adopted new and fashionable surnames of higher castes. This story is a kind of message and suggestion to those Dalits who are enjoying the respect and honour by adopting pseudo-social status. Later or sooner, if their real identity is revealed, they would face the same consequences as encountered by the anonymous protagonist of the mentioned story. Baburao Bagul’s short story “When I Hid My Caste” would be critically evaluated in the light of traditional Indian aesthetics i.e. Indian *rasa theory* along some new traits of the aesthetics of Dalit Literature portrayed in the same.

Key-Words: Aesthetics, Untouchable, Dalit, Caste, Hatred, Humanity, Equality.

The Research Paper: The protagonist of the story “When I Hid My Caste” has not been given any name by the author thinking that he can be any one from the crowd of Dalits who have hidden their castes based social reality. Here, in this story, the anonymous protagonist goes to Gujrat as he gets a job in Indian Railways at Surat. His *harsh bhavas* are explicit in his feelings as:

The joy of having got a job had made my mind as frisky as spring, as brave as rain.

This sense of well being had left me with no fear of anyone. No man was a

stranger. I had not a care in the world. . . . For I had spent the night in the train, dreaming up a wonderworld of happiness.

So there I was, flowing like a morning breeze, when I saw a group of workers in front of me and called out to them, bringing them to an abrupt halt (Bagul 117).

First of all the protagonist comes in contract with a Boiler-Fitter working in Indian Railways at Surat in Gujrat, his name is Ranchhod who behaves in a friendly manner with the protagonist and provides a room for him on rent. His co-workers get impressed when they see a book of Mayakovsky's poems in his hand. The readers may feel *the adbhuta rasa* in the first meeting between the protagonist and his fellow workers:

They were taking in, with a look of awe, my coat, topi, dhotar, Kolhapuri slippers, the book of Mayakovsky's poems in one hand and the trunk to which my bedding was tied. The respect on all faces, their curiosity, all this added to the joy I felt in getting a job. My mind, filled with this happiness, was like a woman dreaming of her lover. I could have got lost in all happiness but then in a hesitant voice, Ranchhod asked, ' . . . But what is your caste?' (117).

He listens to this question and feels *the adbhuta rasa* and feels wondered among the workers. Just then he thinks of a plan and rejoins, "Why do you ask me my caste? Can you not see who I am?" (117). He doesn't answer the question on his caste in plain words rather tries to hide his caste and tells further, "Me, I am a Mumbaikar" (117). But he doesn't feel satisfied with his own answer and extends the same in following words – "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" (117). Then he feels satisfied with his answer and asks his fellow workers, "Got that? Or should I go over it again?" (117). Moreover he tries to leave a good impression on them so he asks, "Do you want it in verse?" (117) and he further tells that, "Still buoyed up by my joy, I growled and walked on. For my mind, dreamstruck, was already racing ahead of me" (217-18). The dubious presentation of the protagonist's identity leaves *the moha bhavas* in the hearts of his fellow-workers and he "could hear the pair of them muttering to each other" (118) in the following words:

'Arre Ranchhod', said Devji, 'don't let this one get away. Don't lose the rent. He's a Marathi maanus. And a fearless one too. Possibly a Brahmin, maybe Kshatriya. Call him back. Go. Run after him' (118).

Ranchhod cannot collect much courage to call him back. He feels *the glani bhavas* for not identifying the generosity and greatness of the protagonist. He asks his friend Devji to call him back on his behalf. Listening to this frightened chattering he feels that *all these people are small enough to fit into his pocket and he can hoodwink them easily*. When Devji's efforts do not turn fruitful, Ranchhod tries himself with *the vrida bhavas* and explains his position that — "Now look here, don't get angry. When we meet a stranger, we always ask him his caste. This is the way in our country" (118). And he agrees to rent one room to him at five rupees a month, keeping in mind that he might be some one from Brahmin or Kshatriya castes. But Devji comes ahead with his *vitarka bhavas* and begins his comments on the untouchables. He tries his best to justify his caste-based-hatred in the following words:

‘Brother, one can eat mud with a caste brother, but one shouldn’t attend a feast with someone of a lower caste. A man like you is not going to live with some poverty-stricken dhedas, is he? Nor are you going to lose what you’ve earned by living with thieves’ (118).

The *vitarka bhavas* expressed by Devji are against Dalit community as whole, whether they are vicked or generous. Every Dalit will boil with rage on listening to such fissiparous thoughts. The words spoken by Devji are insulting too, for Dalits. But the protagonist does not reveal his identity and swallows all insulting words spoken by Devji and he tries to be more human and generous amongst those upper caste people and speaks with extra moderate words as:

‘You shouldn’t speak that way in front of me, a new citizen of a new Bharat. We’re all the creators of the new nation. There are no dhedas, no poor, no Brahmins.’ . . .

Words like that made a rich country like ours into a beggar. Got it?’ (118).

The protagonist comes up with the feelings of *raudra rasa* in the above lines but he still hides his caste and does not tell reality to his fellow workers. He shows his interest in the room and then Ranchhod becomes worried and requests to come to his room to live in and also to oblige him. He agrees to live in that room as a tenant. Here it must be discerned that Ranchhod beseeches him to be his tenant thinking that he is either a Brahmin or a Kshatriya, but surely they don’t believe that he might be a Mahar from Maharashtra. A Mumbaikar but a Mahar-Mumbaikar.

The deal has been done. Then Ranchhod asks him to have a cup of tea in some canteen situated nearby. They go to the canteen. There is no sufficient space in the canteen. They try to adjust themselves inside the room. Just then the protagonist hears “a voice like the cruel crack of a pistol-shot: ‘Mahar’” (119). He is taken aback. He feels *adbhuta rasa* instantly which is soon transformed into *bhayanaka rasa* in the following lines:

‘M’ har ?’ Ranchhod asked, turning his head and shrinking into himself. And my mind, which had been soaring like the Garuda, was brought crashing to the ground. The joy, washing over my body, dried up. The tingly bubbles in my bloodstream evaporated. The words of our earlier conversation danced like demons in front of my eyes. I stood there, rooted to the spot, like a stone rammed into the earth (119).

The protagonist’s situation becomes terrible because he thinks that he has been identified that he is a Mahar but he doesn’t know that Ranchhod speaks the word *Mahar* for someone else who has entered the canteen. To save himself from contamination, Ranchhod feels fear and suddenly shouts – *Mahar*. He asks someone there in the canteen, “Tiwari, what does *Mahar* mean?” (120). Ramcharan Tiwari replies with his half-knowledge, “Mahar means Maharashtrian. They are like Shivaji the Great; warriors” (120). The man, who has been referred to as *Mahar* responds and relieves the protagonist from tension. He explains – “No Panditji, not like that. I’m one of Dr. Ambedkar’s party, of his caste. My name is Kashinath Sakpal, of Mumbai, Kala Chowky” (120). Kashinath’s rising voice quietens the panic that has invaded the protagonist’s heart. All the *chinta bhavas* of the protagonist disappear as soon as he comes to know that he has not been referred to as *Mahar* rather it is Kashinath Sakpal who himself explains about his own lowly social status with confidence. He again clarifies his own position as – “Means an

Untouchable. You're right on target, Pandit Bhaiyyaji, said Kashinath with a snigger" (120). Tiwari becomes angry to his full degree and shouts in a rage, "Smash the dirty dheda" (120). And several people sitting in the canteen scream in unison, "Get him" (120). The Mahar, Kashinath is not a coward and he leaves the impressions of *vira rasa* in the hearts of the readers which is evident in the following words:

Kashinath set down the cup that had just touched his lips, he stuck both his hands in his pockets, cocked his head, inflated his chest and roared at them, a powerful, sensational roar: 'come on them. Let's have you. Tiwari, come on. Hey, Ranchhod. Oy oldies, you come on too. Hey fatso, that means you too. Come on, all of you, any of you, however many of you. One? Two? Three? Come on then' (120).

All the upper caste people present in the canteen feel *the raudra rasa* due to the fury of Kashinath and no one dares to get up to combat with him. He is not a man of easy stuff so he comes up with his *vibodh bhavas* and utters the following words:

Kashinath began to feel the courage he was showing. He warned them, arrogantly: 'I'm off then. I'll tell your foreman a thing or two about the Constitution of India. And that will land you all in jail. I'll get you thrown out of your jobs. Out you'll go, like ants flicked away' (120).

Kashinath begins to move forward towards the upper caste people in the canteen "like thunder, still spewing, still railing, ranting, talking big" (121). Everyone fears of Kashinath's *raudra roop*. But Tiwari tries to lessen the terror of Kashinath and says to all present these – "I am here. I'll talk to my brother and straighten him out. Sit down . . ." (121). Ramcharan Tiwari's brother is the foreman clerk in Indian Railways at Surat so he shows off his confidence in the presence of his colleagues. They all conspire to get rid of Kashinath in the presence of the protagonist of this story who is an untouchable himself but he doesn't intervene in the matter and doesn't show his caste before the high caste people, but his inner-self feels fear and tension full of *glani bhavas* which can be explained in the following words:

. . . I was so disheartened, so saddened, so reduced by their rage that I decided to return Mumbai without further ado. I felt disgusted and disturbed but then I remembered how poor we were, and like a sick ox, I lowered my head and made for the foreman's office (121).

Ramcharan Tiwari and his colleagues are abusing Kashinath, the untouchable but the protagonist bears the same insult with his head bowed down. His face shows worries and tension of his heart. And seeing his bowed head and disordered gait, his fellow worker Devji comes to him and asks, "Thakur, are you all right? You running a fever?" (121). Devji requests him to give his bag to him and says, "I'll look after your bag. There are lots of thieves around these parts and they are mostly these untouchables" (121). This is *the vitarka bhava* opined by a high caste man against untouchables only out of hatred against these people. They try to get rid of *the bibhatsa rasa* created by *the bibhatsa roop* of Kashinath. On the way to the foreman's office, the protagonist comes across Kashinath, he feels moved by his behaviour who frankly and boldly tells his caste without caring any kind of fear or inferiority. He

wants to be familiar with Kashinath on the issue of same caste. The thoughts in his mind are as: “I’m also from Mumbai, like you . . . and of your caste as well” (122). But he cannot complete the line and Ranchhod drags him away from Kashinath. They enter the foreman’s office who enquires, “Hey, what were you saying to that unruly Untouchable?” (122). The protagonist feels hurt by the words of the foreman, because he is an untouchable himself, but he has no courage to disclose his caste before the high caste people who consider him as a man of their own high caste. He doesn’t want to listen to the abusive language for Kashinath being the member of his lower caste so he comes ahead with his arguments and asks the foreman, “Who is Untouchable? Fire is untouchable. The sun is untouchable. Death is untouchable. The five basic elements in their ideal forms are untouchable” (122). The protagonist knows the importance of his job so he doesn’t want to take any risk of losing it and at the same time he doesn’t want to reveal his caste to counter the hatred and insulting behaviour of his fellow-workers. So he speaks very carefully before those who hate his fellow untouchable. His language is very dubious and misleading. He utters the following words full of Pseudo Dalit Consciousness:

“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–worriers. My hands are the wheels of Bharat’s progress” (123).

The *vyadhi bhavas* of the protagonist-narrator have been expressed in the above-mentioned words and he tries to present his *vibodh bhavas* as well. But the meekness inside him does not allow him to disclose the reality of his caste. Once again he argues in chaste Sanskritized Hindi that – “‘I am the artisan of the new joys of the common man. I am a warrior in the cause of humanity. I am willing to give my life for it. I have a name. I have a city. Mumbai.’ . . . I am a citizen-worker. I am among those who will lead Manu’s backward nation to glory. I am a poet’ (123). Mataprasad’s younger brother Ramcharan feels astonished on listening the word ‘poet’. He feels admiration for the ‘poet’ protagonist. But the latter has no courage to reveal his lower caste before the higher caste people. He feels ashamed himself and his thoughts explore the same in the following words:

I felt greedy for my job. And once again, thinking of my poverty–stricken home, I began to regret my earlier intemperate behaviour. To hold on to my job, I told him my name as politely and respectfully as possible.

. . . I felt even sorrier for the way I had spoken to him. I felt so bad, I said: ‘forgive me’ (124).

The foreman, Mataprasad is pleased and impressed by the national language Hindi spoken by a ‘Marathi Maanush’. All of a sudden he asks the protagonist his certificates. It indicates some enquiry into his hidden reality of caste. But he tells a lie: “I forgot them at home. . . . I liked art and literature too much to want to study further” (124). Mataprasad again comes ahead with his *vitarka bhava* and says, “‘That’s why our people remain backward. That’s why these low caste, these Chamaars and the like, get ahead. They become officers, even ministers. They have so many facilities in the Railways that tomorrow if that low-caste Kashinath wants he can become a clerk. He too is a

non-Matric. You will both begin as cleaners but one day he will rise to foreman or driver or controller. So get those certificates sent to you, understand?” (124 - 25).

Ramcharan is so much impressed by the poetic nature that he comes ahead to serve the protagonist as his helper or attendant. He says to him, “You’re my guru from this day forth. You must explain poetry to me” (125). Although, this display of devotion frightens the untouchable protagonist and after some time, Kashinath, another Mahar from Maharashtra breaks the silence with his raged voice: “I am a Mahar but that does not mean I’m going to clean human shit and piss from the walls” (125). His *bhayanaka roop* spreads terror all around and the narrator feels intimacy with him. Kashinath is standing before the muqaddam and denying to clean the human shit from the walls. The protagonist tries to speak as a mediator. He argues, “These menial jobs should not be given to educated workers. You should assign these tasks to those who have no skills” (126). Ramcharan Tiwari’s anger comes out in the following words: “Which means that poor, old, uneducated Brahmins should do them? A veritable sage!” (126). The words ‘a veritable sage’ hurt the untouchable protagonist but he does not rejoin directly, rather he comes up with indirect arguments and says to Ramcharan:

Tiwari, the youth of this country have always been its priceless and immortal wealth. With the five elements, they represent the sixth force. Our unfortunate and poor country is the only one that treats them with such disrespect. Which is why you see nothing but sorrow in all ten directions’ (126).

No one likes the words spoken by the protagonist. They show their dislike for Kashinath in a more bitter way than before. The muqaddam forces Kashinath to clean the shit from the walls. But he is fighting with his determination against that thought. He begins fight on the same issue every day. He begins to carry a knife in his pocket to counter his opponents. The protagonist feels special attachment with him but being a coward and timid idiot, he does not express his hidden feelings. “Like a frightened rabbit” (127) he continues to conceal his lower caste. His pseudo identity develops extra respect in the heart of Ramcharan Tiwari especially for his poetry. He tells the same that:

Every day, he would come up to me at least ten times. Every Sunday, he would invite me to eat a meal with him, his invitation whole hearted, his insistence increasing to the point where he was almost in tears. And I turned him down each time with the same adamant refusals that would set him off and he would curse and swear at his brother. His devotion and love would set off explosions in the quiet of my own home (127-28).

The *moha bhavas* in the heart of Ramcharan Tiwari for the untouchable protagonist disturb the peace of mind of the latter. And lastly the protagonist decides to leave his job. He applies for the same and Mataprasad Tiwari, the foreman approves it and he begins to collect his documents from the concerned office. Somehow Ramcharan comes to know about his leave and “like a poor beggar, he began to follow me about with one prayer on his lips” (128). Now and then, there is only one request on his lips and that is – “Please come and eat at my home” (128). Finally on the pay day, the protagonist agrees to go to Ramcharan’s home for a meal.

The caste based hatred in the minds of Ranchhod and Ramcharan make the protagonist to think for a while about his visit to Ramcharan's home for a meal. Ranchhod begins to doubt the caste of the protagonist. Knowing this, he begins to pack his beddings and other luggage in a trunk. Ramcharan comes to know of this and he asks, "I have invited you to eat with me. . . . And yet, you're leaving without saying a word to me?" (131). The protagonist pays the rent to Ranchhod's wife, who has rented him a room for the period of his stay in Surat. He prepares to leave Surat just then Ramcharan comes ahead and requests, "Ustad, come home with me" (131). But the protagonist politely beseeches Ramcharan, "Do me a favour and walk with me. I have something important to tell you" (131-32). He wants to tell Ramcharan everything about his hidden caste. But Ramcharan rejects his every plea and forces him to go to his home for a meal. Finally he goes to Ramcharan's home where his wife Saraswati welcomes him with devotion and respect. It is beyond the expectations of anyone that the wife of a Brahman welcomes an untouchable with such devotion and respect. Saraswati "touched the feet of a man who was lower than her husband, younger than he, of a less socially acceptable complexion" (132). Ramcharan says to him, "Sit there. Have a bath, I'll rub you down with oil" (132). The protagonist requests Saraswati to cease the extraordinary respectable ways for him. She explains that – "Our guest is as our God" (132). The meal is ready and they are about to start to eat that just then the protagonist says, "Shall we eat outside" (133) of the home and the host Ramcharan says, "No, you are the guru of a Brahmin' . . . 'Come inside'" (133). He tells, "But I am not a Brahmin . . ." (133). Ramcharan again comes ahead with new thought and says, "Never mind, you are my guru" (133). The Brahmin family's hospitality stirs the emotions of the untouchable protagonist. He is moved. He sleeps there after taking meal, but when he awakes, he is taken aback to see the scene before his eyes:

What woke me up was a sudden rain of blows, falling at me from every direction. Ramcharan's room was full of people. Among them were people who were abusing me, accusing me of concealing my caste. There were others who were cursing, reminding themselves of the proverb that a snake in the house was asking to be butchered. And so they were doing their best to live up to the maxim. Ramcharan had gone from utmost devotion to demonical behaviour and was asking questions even as he hit me. He was enraged that his wife had served me and this was fuelling the fire of his anger which would not subside (133-34).

This scene generates *adbhuta rasa* in the hearts of the readers which after sometime changes into *bibhatsa rasa*. Sorrows and helplessness have made the protagonist's tongue heavy so he couldn't speak properly. Ramcharan, a devotee Brahmin has turned into a monstrous Brahmin. No word comes out of the protagonist's mouth. He receives all the punches as they come. He starts to bleed from some parts of his body. But Ramcharan's wife Saraswati has no idea to confront the men who are beating the protagonist. She tries to intervene and cries to all of them, "Let him go. It's not his fault. He refused to come here. It was we who forced him to come. He has lost everything. Let him be or I'll throw myself over his body" (134). On listening to the words from Ramcharan's wife, the crowd gets dispersed shouting to each other about another untouchable i.e. Kashinath — "Hey, that dheda gangster from Mumbai is attacking people with a knife" (134). After few minutes Kashinath comes in the room where the

protagonist is lying on the ground after receiving a sound beating by the high caste people. He seems furious. His *raudra roop* makes the protagonist frightened. To avoid any danger to Ramcharan and his wife Sarawsati, the protagonist gets up with much difficulty and says, “Kashinath, let’s go” (135). Saraswati feels relief in her heart as the untouchables start to move out of her baithak. The untouchable protagonist explains his last moments in the house of Ramcharan Tiwari in the following lines:

Everything had been stolen from me. Ramcharan had ripped up my certificates and thrown them away. My head was bowed, my walk uncertain. My heart was a city rich with revolution. And Kashinath, with a naked knife in his hand, was roaring; ready to use it on all comers (135).

Slowly and steadily they get out of the settlement, Kashinath says to him with affection, “‘Masthur, let’s go to a police station’” (135) but he denies to register any complaint against them who have beaten him and after contemplation for few seconds he rejoins to Kashinath, “‘When was I beaten by them? It was Manu who thrashed me. Come, Kashinath . . .’” (135). Thus the story ends with *shanta rasa* with open ending. Perhaps both the untouchables have been transformed into Dalits and they go to Mumbai leaving Surat to its own fate. The incident narrated in the present story is associated with Dalit consciousness which can easily be found in abundance in the writings of Dalit writers. Sharan Kumar Limbale has written that “Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness” (Limbale 32). This trait is the lifeline of aesthetics of Dalit Literature which has been discussed in this story at a length. Thus it can be said that this is “a positive development so far as Dalit literature is concerned” (Kumar 63). To assess the agony and suffering of the marginalized, two new *Rasas* are introduced by Acharya Jawdekar. He reiterates that “revolt [be recognized as] the tenth *rasa* and ‘cry’ should be accepted as the eleventh *rasa*” (Qtd. in Limbale 115). Revolt against the set social customs and cry for equality has been presented strongly in the mentioned story which are the main traits of the aesthetics of Dalit Literature.

Conclusion: “When I Hid My Caste” is a Dalit short story which unveils the opportunist mentality and inferiority complex among Dalits who hide their castes and modify their surnames to overcome the inferiority complex and try to upgrade themselves by changing their surnames or adopting fashionable titles to hide their social reality of lower castes. The protagonist-narrator of this story also hides his caste and becomes silent on this issue consequently people think that he belongs to some upper caste and most probably to Brahmin caste. He does so to escape from the fear and agony of casteism prevailing in Indian societies. But he faces insult and humility when his caste is known to the people who were his friends earlier. The upper caste friends of the protagonist become furious and violent when they come to know his caste and they give him a sound beating. Then a Dalit comes ahead to rescue him and saves his life. *The moha bhavas* of the upper caste friends of a Dalit transform into *the asura bhavas* after knowing the reality of his untouchable caste. This story also explores some new traits of aesthetics as far as Indian literature is concerned. The portrayal of an anonymous untouchable as protagonist and concealment of his caste have been considered as new aesthetics of Dalit Literature in this story by the author. Here in this story the unnamed protagonist might be any one from the untouchables who usually hide their castes and enjoy respect and

honour in society. But the consequences faced by the protagonist are also the important trait of Dalit aesthetics discussed by Baburao Bagul in the mentioned story.

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