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# Unveiling the Oppressed Body: Female Dalit Body Politics in India through Baburao Bagul and Yashica Dutt

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**Abstract:** India's complex social fabric is marked by a rigid caste system that has perpetuated discrimination and marginalisation for centuries. The caste structure not only establishes clear boundaries between castes through endogamous social relations, but also determines control over resources, productivity, and sexuality. Among the most vulnerable groups within this hierarchical structure are Dalit women, who face compounded forms of oppression due to their caste and gender, spanning economic, physical, and mental aspects. At the core of this oppression lies the Dalit woman's body, a battleground where power dynamics intersect and the struggle for autonomy and dignity unfolds. This paper delves into the exploration of female Dalit body politics in India, with a particular focus on two influential literary works: Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (2018) and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019). The aim is to unveil, through these texts, the intersectionality of caste and gender, both past and present, revealing the violence, exploitation, and marginalisation that reflects on the Dalit female body, stemming from and affecting the economic, physical, and psychological dimension.

**Keywords:** Dalit; caste; gender; body; intersectionality

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## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

India's complex social fabric is marked by a rigid caste system that has perpetuated discrimination and marginalisation for centuries. The caste structure not only establishes clear boundaries between castes through endogamous social relations, but also determines control over resources, productivity, and sexuality. Among the most vulnerable groups within this hierarchical structure are Dalit women, who face compounded forms of oppression due to their caste and gender, spanning economic, physical, and mental aspects. At the core of this oppression lies the Dalit woman's body, a battleground where power dynamics intersect, and the struggle for autonomy and dignity unfolds. This paper delves into the exploration of female Dalit body politics in India, with a particular focus on two influential literary works: Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (2018) and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019). Through these texts, the aim is to unveil the lived experiences of Dalit women, both past and present, examining the various dimensions of their oppression and shedding light on their resilience. In order to achieve this, the article will employ the intersectionality theory and explore the factors influencing the economic hardships faced by Dalit women, the ways in which their bodies are marked and exploited, and the specific psychological burdens associated with these experiences.

Emerging in the 1980s with the goal of addressing the interconnected systems of oppression faced by women, particularly black women, based on race, gender, and class, the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) offers a valuable perspective to examine the experiences of Dalit women. By acknowledging that their identities extend beyond being solely 'woman' or 'Dalit' and by recognising the complex interplay of various forms of oppression, intersectionality enables us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the specific challenges encountered by Dalit women and empowers us to work towards dismantling the structures that sustain their marginalisation. In the same vein, in her book *Gendering*

*Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003), Uma Chakravarty introduces the concept of graded patriarchies within the framework of the brahmanical patriarchy, shedding light on the distinct types of oppression faced by Dalit women.

Examining the economic suffering of Dalit women reveals a long history of significant economic hardships. In the past, they faced severe economic marginalisation and were subjected to exploitative labour practices, including menial occupations and bonded labour, which perpetuated their poverty and hindered their upward mobility. Deshpande (2011) provides valuable insights into the historical factors that contributed to the economic challenges faced by Dalit women, particularly in the rural context, where the intersection of gender and caste limits employment opportunities for them. Currently, Dalit women continue to encounter various economic obstacles due to intersecting discrimination based on caste, gender, and class. Limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment prospects complicates their ability to acquire necessary skills, secure better jobs, and escape informal and precarious work. This exposes them to low wages, exploitative conditions, and a lack of social protection, ultimately undermining their economic advancement (Thorat and Sabharwal 2015).

The physical–sexual dimension of oppression experienced by Dalit women involves the marking and weaponisation of their bodies. They face constant threats of sexual violence and physical assault, perpetuating a cycle of oppression and reinforcing their marginalised status and vulnerability. The issue of honour intersects with inequality, as Dalit women often face vilification and accusations of lacking virtue and moral character when they enter the public sphere to earn a living. Their sexuality becomes vulnerable to the lascivious advances of men due to the absence of adequate protection and societal prejudice against them. Additionally, violence is inflicted on Dalit women's bodies as a means of controlling caste dominance and maintaining caste purity (Chakravarti 1993).[1] Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) added that gender roles within caste-based societies are constructed in a way that links a caste's 'manhood' to men's control over women. Consequently, the female body has become a symbol of a community or household's honour, thus serving as a means of control: humiliating women is a means of diminishing the status of their caste (p. 2131), as well as asserting caste authority and superiority. Furthermore, dominant castes have historically believed they had the right to exploit Dalit women's bodies as sexual slavery has been subsumed under the physical labour provided by women (Kannabiran 2012). Rege (1995, p. 20) added that lower-caste women have been denied the right to seek justice for sexual violence as it is often considered that they have no 'honour' to be stolen. As female bodies are symbols of familial honour and lineage, more violence is inflicted upon them when caste boundaries and expectations of sexual behaviour are transgressed. Acts such as rejecting arranged marriages, engaging in pre-marital sex, or seeking divorce from abusive husbands are considered shameful, resulting in punishment being inflicted on the 'shamed' woman aimed at purifying the family (Rana and Mishra 2013).[2]

The intersectionality of caste and gender not only leads to physical discrimination and oppression, but also imposes unique psychological burdens on Dalit women. Most of them experience heightened emotional distress due to daily discrimination, humiliation, and stigma. This can manifest as feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, helplessness, or depression (Pal 2015). The social cognitive theory proposed by Bandura (1986) emphasises how repeated experiences of discrimination and devaluation influence self-perception, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. The internalisation of oppression, self-blame, shame, and guilt can also occur as a result (Rao 2003). The consequences of sexualised violence on Dalit women also extend beyond the physical realm, shaping Dalit women's identities, agency, and social standing within their communities (Brueck 2012). The cumulative impact of discrimination and abuse also increases the risks of suicidal ideation and self-harm, exacerbated by limited support systems and access to mental health services (Human Rights Watch 2017; Teltumbde 2018).

## 2. Background on Authors

From its very beginning, Dalit literature has been characterised by its polemical nature, emphasising the importance of social mobilisation. Through various forms of life writing, Dalits have utilised this space to challenge caste discrimination, expose casteism, and counteract the negative cultural stereotypes imposed upon them.

Baburao Bagul, a writer and critic, played a pivotal role in shaping the political and aesthetic significance of Dalit literature. Born in Maharashtra, India in 1930, Bagul belonged to the Dalit community and grew up in a society deeply divided by caste. He personally witnessed and experienced the systemic injustices faced by Dalits, which influenced his Dalit consciousness. Motivated by these experiences, Bagul sought to raise awareness about Dalit issues and challenge the dominance of Hindu-centric literature in India.

Bagul's journey as a writer was intertwined with the sociopolitical context of his time. He, along with the Dalit Panthers and the broader body of Dalit literature emerging from Maharashtra, was deeply influenced by the life and writings of B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a revered Dalit leader and an inspiration for many Dalit writers and activists. The strong non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra, as well as the depressed classes movements and the Ambedkarite movement provided a sense of collective identity and inspiration for resistance against caste-based oppression and an environment conducive to Bagul's growth as a Dalit writer and critic, shaping his ideology, literary style, and dedication to effecting social change. Bagul contended that the dominant Hindu-centric nature of literature in India excluded the lowest castes from literary works (Bagul 1992), thus he aimed to challenge this by placing the periphery at the centre. He advocated for Dalit literature not to be confined to political and philosophical debates, as such a narrow approach would stifle creativity and passion; instead, he envisioned Dalit literature as an Ambedkarite written tradition that reconfigures modernity through the introduction of new writing styles. His debut collection of short stories titled *When I Hid My Caste* ("Jevha Mi Jat Chorali Hoti"), published in 1963, had a profound impact on Indian short story writing. It expanded the boundaries of the genre and transformed literary imagination into a battle for equality, with marginalised individuals assuming the role of protagonists.

Even when not autobiographical, Dalit writers have demonstrated a strategic and interventionist approach in incorporating real lives and biographical elements into their fictional works (Brueck 2017, p. 77). A notable example of this approach is seen in the works of Bagul, who drew inspiration from his personal experiences, as well as the struggles endured by his family and fellow caste members in crafting his collection of short stories. Each story in this collection serves as a candid social commentary, seamlessly woven together, offering a portrayal of the Dalit existence half a century ago. Infused with Marxist ideals and Ambedkar's Buddhist principles, the characters embody a humanist nature that transcends simplistic binaries. While the characters share certain similarities, they provide diverse perspectives and address the pressing issues concerning Dalit identity during India's independence era. Their stories unfold through the language of emotions rather than pure logic, presenting experiences rather than linear causality. Through the depiction of everyday lives, including those of slum dwellers, sex workers, gangsters, and rebellious youths, Bagul highlights the enduring nature of caste and its immediate impact on people's routines and daily activities. His concise storytelling, careful and brutal vocabulary selection, and the exploration of poignant issues prompt readers to engage in self-reflection and develop a compassionate outlook within an inhumane caste-based society. Bagul's work delves deep into the experiences of Dalit women and exposes the pervasive violence, exploitation, and marginalisation they endured at the time when India was achieving its independence and democracy. The relevance of Bagul's stories persists even after decades, as Yashica Dutt demonstrates.

Yashica Dutt, a journalist based in New York, was born into the Valmiki family in Ajmer, Rajasthan. For a significant portion of her life she passed as a Brahmin and felt a sense of shame whenever caste-related discussions arose. However, her journey took a transformative turn when she delved into feminist theory, discovered the legacy of Ambed-

kar, and engaged in conversations with classmates who shared their own experiences of abuse, discrimination, and racism. All these empowered Dutt to speak her truth and breathe new life into the existing literary corpus by exploring how traditional manifestations of caste discrimination have evolved into contemporary forms, including debates surrounding the meritocracy within the Indian reservation system and the transnationalisation of caste in diasporic contexts.

In her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019), Dutt goes beyond her personal journey of grappling with her Dalit identity in urban settings by interweaving the experiences of discrimination, prejudice, atrocities, apathy, and shame faced by Dalits with a socio-political commentary on significant moments in Dalit history and observations on the pervasive nature of the caste system in India, all from a Dalit feminist perspective. Furthermore, Dutt's narrative reimagines certain tropes of the diasporic experience, such as identity crisis, migration, alienation, and acculturation, through the lens of the Dalit perspective. In doing so, the memoir takes on the form of a fast-paced socio-political narrative from a new generation that will significantly influence the future expression of Dalit identity. The publication of Dutt's memoir marks a notable shift in the tradition of Dalit autobiographical writing, situating it within a global conversation on marginalisation and discrimination. This shift enables Dutt to redefine caste from an inherent, fixed identity to a more fluid and performative concept. By emphasising the performative aspect of caste, it aligns with various global discourses on marginality and discrimination, thereby positioning Dalit literature within the realm of protest literature. Moreover, by bringing to the forefront the intersectionality of caste, gender, and identity, her memoir becomes a powerful medium for unmasking the challenges faced by Dalit women in post-independent India, while also revealing their resilience and determination to challenge societal norms and claim their rightful place in the social fabric.

Both narratives, through their unique perspectives and depictions of diverse spatial and temporal contexts, can be seen as 'testimonios' (Nayar 2006, p. 84) that delve into the complexities of Dalit identity, with a specific focus on the experiences of Dalit women. Through an in-depth analysis of these two influential works, this paper seeks to unpack the complexities of female Dalit body politics in India as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance. It explores the historical and contemporary contexts that have shaped their experiences, paying particular attention to the economic, physical, and mental dimensions of their suffering. This paper will examine the themes, narratives, and socio-cultural implications present in both works, drawing upon critical analysis and scholarly perspectives. Through this exploration, the aim is to deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the female Dalit body, fostering greater awareness and advocating for transformative change in Indian society.

## 3. Dalit Women's Intersectional Oppression

### *3.1. Economic Dimension*

Dalit women have historically faced substantial economic hardships, including marginalisation and exploitative labour practices. These circumstances have perpetuated their poverty and hindered their ability to improve their social and economic status. In Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*, the story "Revolt" focuses on Jai, a young and educated Dalit who resists following his parents' path of becoming a Bhangi (manual scavenger). Despite not being in the spotlight, the story also displays the hardships of his mother, Bhani. Although both she and her husband are manual scavengers—a degrading and hazardous occupation—it is Bhani who must toil daily in a meagre-paying, exploitative, and nauseating job. The narrative depicts the grim reality faced by many Dalit women like her who are trapped in menial and dehumanising occupations solely due to their caste identity.

Dalit women presently still face multiple economic challenges resulting from intersecting forms of discrimination based on caste, gender, and class, creating a domino effect as limited educational prospects hinder their acquisition of the necessary skills for better

jobs. Dutt sheds light on this issue through the experience of her mother. When her mother expressed her intention to join the IPS (Indian Police Service) to her soon-to-be husband and his family, they initially reassured her that she was free to sit the exam after the celebration of the wedding. Despite this assurance, her mother was eventually dissuaded from pursuing her ambition and ended up working in several temporal jobs (Dutt 2019, p. 5). Through this, Dutt illustrates the enduring challenges faced by Dalit women in independent and democratic India in their pursuit of economic empowerment, and how societal expectations and discriminatory attitudes towards women—Dalit ones in particular—often hinder their aspirations and prevent them from realising their full potential.

Dalit women have faced not only economic discrimination, but also the perception of being financial burdens. Bagul describes how girls were seen as an economic burden that parents sought to marry off to the highest bidder as quickly as possible. Fathers were enticed by the wealth and social status of potential suitors, disregarding their daughters' well-being and often sending them into unfavourable marriages (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 113). Similarly, Dutt remarks that even with a supposedly progressive mindset, her maternal grandfather considered having two daughters as excessive because of the dowry he would have to pay. Moreover, despite his relative forward thinking, her grandfather saw no value in investing in the education of his girls, refusing to sell property to fund their education and dismissing it as a "wasteful expense" (Dutt 2019, p. 34).

Dalit women have also faced restrictions on their freedom to choose a spouse, due to economic considerations. As Dutt recounts, during the engagement, her mother learned of her prospective husband's "fondness for alcohol" (p. 5), which greatly distressed her. Nevertheless, she felt obligated to go through with the marriage out of fear of the repercussions, not only for herself but also for her entire family, as it would adversely affect the marriage prospects of her siblings (p. 6). Furthermore, patriarchal norms in India have manipulated traditional taboos, often associated with caste Hindu traditions, to justify and uphold practices that reinforce women's subordination within marriage. One such practice is widow re-marriage, heavily linked, as Chakravarti (1996) reckons, with the economic underpinnings of the caste system. Chakravarti argues that in India, especially within both agricultural castes and landless low castes, women served as "direct producers and as reproducers of producers" (p. 16). As the caste system operated as a production system, it played a role in shaping the social norms and practices imposed on women, including the expectation of their continued sexual activity after widowhood. Widow re-marriage has been, thus, not an acknowledgment of widows' sexual needs, but rather a means to exploit their productive and reproductive labour while preserving caste structures (Chakravarti 1995, p. 2254). Bagul lays bare the treatment of Dalit women as perpetual commodities, subject to the judgment of the community, even after the end of a marriage. According to him, "An Indian wife will bear everything but she will not bear widowhood. Being a widow is a terrible punishment... far worse than corporal punishment" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 114).

Contrasting the practice of widow re-marriage, Sati involves the widow voluntarily or involuntarily committing suicide by immolating herself on her deceased husband's cremation pyre.[3] Sati has been traditionally portrayed in a manner that glorifies women who undertake this solemn act. However, Bagul's representation diverges from this conventional perception. In his narrative, the impression conveyed is that of an involuntary Sati, accentuating the harrowing and dreadful aspects of the practice, as the following extract demonstrates:

> 'Bring that demon here. Let's strip her naked and take her in procession through the village,' said Kanhuji Patil. 'No, let's strip her naked and tie her up like a bull and whip her and lead her by the nose to the pyre'. [...] 'Excellent idea. We'll get to see a good hot tamasha. No trace of that prostitute should remain this time. And I'll also be able to say she committed sati,' [...] 'Yes, burn her'. [...] 'Let's burn her'. [...] 'Such witches deserve this kind of treatment.' (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 5)

The underlying motivation behind the practice of Sati stemmed from the apprehension surrounding women's control over property. Male members of the family perceived Sati as

a means of eradicating widows and preventing any potential challenges to their power and economic inheritance. This motive is exemplified by Bagul, where the deceased man's son sought to compel his stepmother to undergo Sati, thereby securing his father's wealth for himself.

As Bagul and Dutt demonstrate in their writings, caste-based practices, influenced by patriarchal power dynamics, have played a role in the continuous economic oppression and exploitation of Dalit women in India, using their bodies against them in various intricate and multifaceted forms and persisting even under democratic precepts.

*3.2. Physical–Sexual Dimension*

Dalit women bear the burden of not only economic hardships and discrimination, but also the physical marking and weaponisation of their bodies, as they are constantly at risk of sexual violence and physical assault, and their bodies become symbolic battlegrounds for asserting caste dominance. Dutt argues that—although gender violence and sexual violence is not limited to Dalit families but exists across all social strata—Dalit women, particularly those residing in rural areas or facing economic disadvantages in urban or rural settings, find themselves at a higher risk and greater susceptibility of experiencing violence from both their own families and society at large (Dutt 2019, p. 6).

Dalit women experience violence aimed at controlling and monitoring their sexuality as their bodies are symbols of honour and caste authority and their exploitation has been justified by their lower social status. Despite being a work of fiction, Bagul draws heavily from his personal experiences and observations to craft his writing. He illustrates women's physical–sexual dominance by depicting the derogatory and dehumanising language used to refer to them, emphasising their subhuman status: "Is she a lady [. . . ]? A woman even? She's a demoness and we should all get some of her" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 11). Paradoxically, when it comes to sexuality, the bodies of Dalit women, otherwise regarded as 'untouchable', become accessible and acceptable to upper-caste men and the concept of untouchability is temporarily nullified through purification rituals.[4]

The accessibility to Dalit women's bodies is linked to the Devadasi system, another form of sexual exploitation endured by Dalit women wherein they are 'dedicated' to temples by their own families in exchange for money.[5] While this practice is presented as a religious service, it essentially involves temple prostitution deeply rooted in Brahminical traditions but predominantly affecting families from the lowest social strata, such as Dalits. Brahminical scriptures promote the idea that through religious duties and virtuous actions, one can accumulate good karma and attain salvation (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013). However, prostitutes are considered fallen women, deviants who are victims of their own karma, thereby hindering their path to spiritual redemption. Moreover, although the system granted some sexual autonomy to Devadasis—also referred to as jogini, basavi, or murali—they were ultimately forced to serve multiple men, irrespective of their caste (Geetha 2014). In "Prisoner of Darkness", Bagul vividly portrays the severe mistreatment endured by Devadasis. The story depicts Banoo, a Devadasi coerced into marrying a village chief. Banoo faces stigmatisation and contempt from the entire village, especially from the chief's son, Devram, as they all blame her for the chief's death solely because of her low identity and bad karma. Devram and the entire village harbour such an intense disdain and disgust towards Banoo that this results in acts of violence against her: "When his anger got out of control, [Devram] hit her. Once, he had even tried to murder her. That was how much he detested her. He saw her as a sinner" (Bagul [1963] 2018, pp. 11–12).

As Dutt argues, Dalit women are still viewed as sexual property, especially by caste Hindu men who feel entitled to their bodies (Dutt 2019, p. 7). Devadasis are not mentioned in *Coming Out as Dalit* per se, but it does discuss the plight of sex workers and their health and safety issues (p. 57). Dutt particularly emphasises the predicament of rape victims who often face numerous obstacles once they gather enough courage to report an abuse or a rape, more so in rural areas. Dutt cites the forced withdrawal of complaints, bribes for silence, or framing with false cases (p. 143). Apart from the retaliation, the blame for

the assault is often shifted to the survivor, rendering the Dalit woman trapped regardless of her response. The perception that Dalit women are sexually available persists even in progressive and feminist circles according to Dutt (p. 149). As she denounces,

> [. . . ] every time a Dalit woman is assaulted, abused, raped or murdered, her caste matters. Even if she is not raped simply because she is Dalit, the conditions that lead to her assault are almost always affected by her status as a lower-caste woman in an upper-caste male-dominated society. (p. 148)[6]

As Dutt argues, while some claim that Dalit women, unlike many upper-caste women, have more independence and 'freedom' to retaliate when abused because they work outside their homes—a notion supported even by progressive upper-caste feminists like Sharmila Rege—they forget the fact that it is precisely in these public spaces that Dalit women are often abused and raped (p. 156). Thus, while Dalit women may be able to fight back, they are also compelled to 'fall in line' with even greater violence (p. 156).

The assault on a woman not only impacts the individual but also becomes an attack on the entire community, serving as a tool for revenge, suppression, and humiliation (Dietrich 2003, p. 58). The fact that Dalit men are not able to protect their wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters due to their marginalised position, leaves them feeling helpless and emasculated. Consequently, they often attempt to regain control by exerting increased patriarchal authority over Dalit women's sexuality, mirroring the traditional power dynamics enforced by upper-caste men over their women (Dietrich 2003; Ilaiah 2002). Dutt acknowledges that increased discrimination against Dalit women stems from a deep adherence to Brahminical patriarchy and authoritarianism, resulting in thorough male dominance and restrictions on women's freedoms and decision-making regarding their love lives, careers, and education (Dutt 2019, p. 8). Bagul displays the brutality faced by Dalit wives at the hands of their husbands as a way to reaffirm their wounded masculinity. In the short story "Monkey", Bapu abuses his wife Sakhu only because her beauty and sexual appeal make him feel weak. He would fling his wife around "as a dog might throw a rat. Her body went limp, blood spurted from many places, [. . . ] but the sight of it only inflamed him further. [. . . ] he wanted to finish her off" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 69). The depiction of physical abuse and the husband's desire to inflict further harm on his wife serve as proof of his attempt to regain the perceived lost power, as Bagul illustrates:

> "The sight of her was enough to make him turn his back on her and run into the hut in rage and fear. Inside the hut, the sight of the bed made him want to throw away the axe he had raised to his shoulders and run back to see her." (p. 64)

Later on, "Gathering all his strength and willpower once again, he threw her away from him" (p. 66), releasing his fury upon her body. Dutt shares her mother's painful experience of being physically abused by her husband, highlighting the pressure put on women to remain silent and endure violence within the marriage, even when family members are aware of the abuse:

> [. . . ] he would drag her from the makeshift kitchen at the back of the house to their room, beating her all the while. One evening when he slapped her, the impact punctured her eardrum. When she told her father about this abuse, he came to see her. But by the time her father came to visit, she had softened her stance, especially after Dad's father 'advised' her to be a good daughter-in-law by not reporting her husband's abuse to her family. (Dutt 2019, p. 6)

Dalit women face increased violence when they defy caste boundaries and societal expectations regarding sexual behaviour. Inter-caste marriages, in particular, are heavily condemned and can have severe consequences for the woman involved. Bagul illustrates this in "Prisoner of Darkness" in which an entire village seeks retribution against a Devadasi who dares to engage in such a transgression by marrying a man belonging to a higher-caste—although a low-caste as well. She not only causes her family to be banished, but the whole community is eager for her blood (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 7). In "Pesuk", a

Dalit woman is first forced to submit to the whims and fancies of Hindu males and is then excommunicated for living immorally, while the polygamous upper-caste husband continues to be venerated and held in esteem.

As these examples show, albeit from different perspectives and genres, sexual violence has attained semiotic density as a distinguishing feature of caste violence and a sign of its discursive centrality in framing female Dalit identity. As both texts demonstrate, the female Dalit body has been collectively objectified and rendered the battleground for the assertion of caste-based pride and dominance (Rao 2003, p. 293). However, while being born a Dalit woman is burdensome enough, being born beautiful compounds the challenges: not only does it expose women to constant threats of violence and abuse, but the perceived attractiveness of a woman used to lead male family members to inflict harm upon her body to prevent such assaults and protect the family's honour. Bagul's short story "Monkey" reveals the exploitation of a Dalit woman's body as a weapon against her. Bapu mistreats his wife Sakhu with the sole intention of stripping her of her beauty, not only to prevent attention from other men, but also to suppress his own desire for her (Bagul [1963] 2018, pp. 62–70). Beauty, as Bagul acknowledges, has exacerbated the brutality experienced by Dalit women:

> [. . . ] he would curse his wife. [. . . .] the desire to deceive and the desire to keep his promises. [. . . ] After the last defeat, he [. . . ] had decided that his wife was the enemy—but memories of Sakhu now tormented him. [. . . ] He was so enraged by this that he even considered murdering her and being done with it. (pp. 62–63)

Bagul's depiction of women's treatment in his time, particularly the underestimation of violence against them, provides valuable insights into the realities experienced by Dalit women and illuminates the systemic issues and power dynamics that perpetuated gender-based violence within Indian society, lived experiences which are often overlooked or marginalised in dominant narratives.

The connection between beauty and violence is again displayed in "Pesuk", where the author vividly describes the mutilation suffered by numerous Dalit women only for being perceived as potential objects of desire. These women endured the sheer disfigurement of their physical appearance: their hair was tangled and discoloured, their foreheads bruised, their noses broken, their whole bodies marked by scars and mutilations. As Bagul puts it, they were reduced to mere remnants of their former selves, overwhelmed by anger, ugliness, and savage cruelty (pp. 109–11).

Dutt sheds light on another bodily issue affecting not only Dalit women, but all Indians in general: society's obsession with skin colour. She explains that colourism, rooted in caste prejudice, associates fairness with a higher caste and, thus, intertwines caste and skin colour (Dutt 2019, p. 28). Unnithan-Kumar (1997) explores the intersections of caste, gender, and skin colour in the context of poverty and social exclusion in India and claims that colourism operates within the broader dynamics of caste-based discrimination and affects the opportunities, identities, and social mobility of individuals. Dutt recounts her mother's preoccupation with her own and her daughter's complexion due to the prevalent belief that fairness equates to beauty (p. 27). Her mother resorted to various remedies and diligently protected her skin from the sun's rays. She also used to bathe her daughter with skin-lightening products from a young age to avoid as much as possible her appearing 'Dalit-looking' (p. 30).

### *3.3. Psychological Dimension*

The intersection of caste and gender results in Dalit women facing unique psychological burdens. They frequently experience heightened emotional distress and a general internalisation of oppression. Dutt confirms that Dalit women often have no recourse but to accept sexual violence as an inevitable part of their lives (Dutt 2019, p. 143). In the same vein, Bagul's short stories portray Dalit women as accustomed to physical retaliation and abuse to the point that they expect it. Sakhu, for instance, was numb with fear just at the sight of her husband. She already knew what awaited her, "that he would attack her like

an enraged bull and that her mother-in-law would burn her lie coal" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 65). As argued before, due to the internalisation of negative stereotypes and the cumulative effects of discrimination and abuse, Dalit women face an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and self-harm. Feeling trapped in an abusive marriage and unable to find any other alternative to get out of it, Dutt argues that just as "good Indian daughters-in-law in her position do" (Dutt 2019, p. 6), her mother contemplated suicide. Later, seven months into her pregnancy, her mother reattempted to harm herself by jumping from the roof of the house and shattering one of her ankles (p. 6). As for Bagul, the entire short story "Pesuk" is dedicated to the 'sacrifice' of Savitri, a Dalit woman who sees no way out of her dreadful situation as a widow. The author presents the act of Sati in a highly idealised manner, depicting the astonishment and even admiration of the onlookers who witnessed Savitri's courageous action: "'She committed Sati. She had not cut off his nose.' 'She didn't?' My heart sank irreversibly. 'Yes. How great is the Indian woman! What a treasure trove of humanity she is! Even death must bow to her'" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 115). This passage quotes the audience's reaction, highlighting their surprise that Savitri chose to commit Sati so as to take revenge on her abusive husband rather than simply mutilating herself, as was customary. This unexpected choice transforms Savitri's desperate attempt to avoid widowhood into a sacrificial and heroic display of female modesty and as a huge power play.

But Dalit women's psychological subjugation is not solely a product of male dominance. Some women operate in a patriarchal world and practice 'proximal power', inflicting harm on other women. The establishment and perpetuation of specific roles and the punishment inflicted upon those who deviate from them contribute to the assimilation of such roles (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015; Mishra 2019). Chakravarti (2003) explains that control over women operates on three levels: ideology, kinship, and the legal system. Women are made to internalise patriarchal stereotypes and regulate their own sexuality in the realm of ideology, with the promise of gaining power, respect, and salvation. Kinship grants male relatives the right to discipline women who defy societal norms. Finally, the legal system empowers the state to punish women for their non-compliance. Chakravarti views this as a cunning mechanism of the Hindu normative order that perpetuates inequitable and hierarchical structures with the complicity of women themselves (Chakravarti 2003, pp. 72–74). At home, Dalit mothers assume the role of matriarchs, instructing and restraining girls in the absence of their husbands (Lundgren 2015; Torri 2009; Tharu 2019) and constantly reminding girls of their marital role once married. Outside home, women continue to oppress each other as a means of exerting control and seeking revenge for their oppression. Older Dalit women often turn aggressive and violent towards younger women as they strive to counter the oppression they face at home and reclaim power and dignity (Gangoli 2007). After marriage, the Dalit woman faces another layer of abuse from her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law. The dynamics of Indian patriarchy and the practice of patrilocality—wherein the wife moves into the husband's family home within an extended family network—contribute to the dominance of the mother-in-law (Anukriti et al. 2020; Rew et al. 2013). Thus, compliance with her authority is expected from the daughter-in-law. Bagul describes this as the "terrifying mother-in-law's proscription" (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 64), which further accentuates Dalit girls' plight, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> 'Are you going to get your honour back by picking up this prostitute [...]? Set her down now, drop that slut.' The old lady [mother-in-law] was out of control. Her hands were itching to grab Sakhu [the daughter-in-law] by the throat and kill her. [...] 'You buffalo, put her down. Grind her in the mud. I tell you, stamp on her, crush her,' the old lady's face was red with anger. [...] She wanted to snap her in two, to eat her alive, to crunch her up as one might a cucumber. [...] She was slapping her face with both hands; then she began to slap her breast and her stomach. Like someone mad, she [...] banged her head upon the ground. (pp. 67–68)

Due to the absence of individuals below them in the social hierarchy, Dalit women have resorted to subjugating the weaker subjects: their own mothers, daughters, and particularly daughters-in-law, thus expanding the multidirectional challenges Dalit women have had to face, with hardly any place of safety or support to seek solace.

Although some Dalit women may have actively participated in upholding both caste and patriarchy, their motivations for doing so vary (Mishra 2019). While some have chosen to assume subordinate roles within the household for the sake of protection and even privilege, some have navigated these roles as a source of transformative power and agency. As an example, Dalit women not only instructed their daughters on how to be a good wife but often educated them on how to prevent rape, take precautions against sexual violence, and respond if such incidents occur. As Dutt argues, Dalit mothers and grandmothers advise young girls to avoid going to the fields alone, work discreetly, and remain silent if any harm befalls them (Dutt 2019, p. 148). At first glance, it may seem that Dalit women teach their daughters to shrink themselves and become invisible, which a priori contradicts the notion of empowerment. However, sharing their experiences and guiding the behaviour of young Dalit girls is a way to ensure survival, to create a 'collective awareness' that is empowering in itself (Begum 2016).

However, while is important to emphasise the physical subjugation experienced by Dalit women, it is equally important to acknowledge that some of them have resorted to using their bodies as a means of defence. Folklore plays a significant role in the lives of Dalits, who create their own myths and legends due to their exclusion from mainstream society. These narratives, often shared through oral traditions and women's gossip sessions, frequently revolve around ghosts and demons that predominantly possess women, which implicitly reinforces the idea that women should stay at home and avoid walking alone, thereby perpetuating their subordination through fear. However, there are also women who have discovered that they can leverage this body politics to resist patriarchy by instilling fear in their oppressors and briefly experiencing a sense of triumph. In "Pesuk", with no other means of protection, a Dalit woman decides to challenge the status quo by assuming the identity of a 'pesuk', a female ghost. By doing so, her intention is to scare the villagers, especially men, and deter them from approaching her to harm her which, as the following passage shows, seems to take effect:

> But a single look into the pesuk's eyes drained the strength from my muscles. My terrified mind began to protest. My careful attention was destroyed. My body shrank into itself [. . . ]. For this was no pesuk. It was a woman of the kind that created great heroines [. . . ]; she had the strength and power [. . . ], the kind of truth and beauty [that] made her as terrible as a ghost. (Bagul [1963] 2018, p. 109)

The entire region was gripped by fear of the pesuk and her attacks, with the legend stating that any man who ventured out would lose his nose (p. 105). Interestingly, the pesuk spared women and even temporarily aided them to challenge the prevailing patriarchal order (p. 105). Bagul illustrates again the ongoing struggle of Dalit women against patriarchy by portraying a situation where a Dalit woman decides to ascend her deceased husband's funeral pyre, rather than enduring a life of widowhood and being reduced to a mere object of sexual exploitation. As Bagul puts it, "the heart of a woman is a complete marvel. [. . . ] she climbed on to the pyre and was reduced to ash. And yet that evil creature [the man] could not see her greatness" (p. 104).

## 4. Conclusions

The exploration of female body politics in Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (2018) and Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) exposes the profound oppression and resilience of Dalit women in India. These works highlight the intersectionality of caste and gender, revealing the violence, exploitation, and marginalisation faced by Dalit women, uncovering the historical and contemporary contexts that shape their suffering across economic, physical, and mental dimensions.

The economic implications for Dalit women in India are severe, as they have been subjected to exploitative labour practices, limited employment opportunities, and barriers to education. This perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement that reflects on their body politics. Not only have they been confined to downgrading and precarious work, but they have also been perceived as financial burdens. This has resulted in restrictions on their freedom to choose spouses or the imposition of practices such as widow re-marriage or Sati.

Dalit women have faced not only economic hardships and discrimination, but also physical violence and sexual exploitation, as their bodies became targets of caste-based dominance and control. They have constantly faced the threat of sexual violence and assault within and outside their homes, with the notion of honour used to vilify and manipulate their sexuality and character. The Devadasi system not only continues to exploit these women, but also strengthens the notion that their bodies are readily available for exploitation. Additionally, society's fixation on fair skin has intensified their discrimination and suffering, leading them to feel self-conscious and excessively preoccupied with their own bodies.

Finally, the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression, resulting in daily discrimination, humiliation, and stigma, has led to emotional distress, eroded self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness in Dalit women. Sexualised violence has exacerbated their psychological burden and has impacted their sense of self and agency. Furthermore, matriarchal oppression within households, particularly the dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, has contributed to their psychological subjugation. However, some Dalit women navigate these roles to empower younger generations and ensure survival, and some even use their bodies as a means of defence and resistance against patriarchy. Thus, as this study has aimed to demonstrate, addressing the suffering of Dalit women requires dismantling caste and gender-based discrimination through a comprehensive approach that considers all the relevant factors. It is essential to recognise that simple caste or class analyses, as well as communal categorisations, cannot fully explain the complexities of Dalit issues (Webster 2007).

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## Notes

1 The caste system has been maintained, in part, through the practice of 'marriage endogamy', which dictates that individuals must marry within their own caste to uphold the caste's 'purity'. When an upper-caste man marries a lower-caste woman it is known as 'hypergamy' since the woman's caste is elevated through marriage, as she adopts her husband's caste as her own. On the other hand, an upper-caste woman is not allowed to marry a lower-caste man—known as 'hypogamy'—because by marrying below her caste, she 'pollutes' not only herself, but also her entire family and caste. In the case of Dalits, the perception of their status in inter-caste marriages carries strong patriarchal undertones; while inter-caste marriages involving Dalit men are often seen as a way of challenging and dismantling the caste system, Dalit women's choices regarding their partners are viewed as betrayals and contrary to the interests of the community. This attitude aligns with Brahminical patriarchy, which promotes sexual freedom for men but denies women the right to exercise their own sexual choices (Raj 2014).

2 'Honour killing' refers to the act of murdering an individual within their own family or social group, perpetrated by other members who believe that the victim has brought shame or dishonour upon their family or community. This form of violence stems from a distorted sense of patriarchal pride, where punishment becomes the ultimate resolution. The grim reality of couples losing their lives or facing relentless persecution for choosing to love someone outside their caste reflects a culture in which such violence is normalised through narratives that portray transgression as a sinful act (Appadurai 1998).

3 'Sati', known as suttee during the colonial era, depicts a virtuous woman who would go to any extent for her husband. Various theories exist regarding its origin. The sociological theory suggests that it emerged as a means to prevent wives from poisoning their forced husbands and remarrying. On the other hand, the religious theory is based on the myth of a Hindu queen who

insisted on being burned alongside her deceased husband to accompany him to heaven and prevent other women, known as Apsaras, from being with him. Lata Mani's article "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India" (Mani 1987) examines the discourse and debates surrounding the practice of Sati during the colonial era. Mani challenges the dominant narrative constructed by British colonial authorities, who portrayed Sati as a symbol of oppression, and presents a nuanced analysis of the complexities involved. Her work contributes to a better understanding of the historical, cultural, and political dynamics that have influenced the debates on Sati in colonial India. Thanks to the efforts of Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, this practice was outlawed in 1829, although it has not completely disappeared (Narayan and Misra 2004).

[4] This refers to the concept of 'graded patriarchy' introduced by Chakravarti (2003), which suggests that women experience varying degrees of patriarchal oppression and are subjected to a semantics of honour. In contrast, men's purity remains unaffected by their sexual activities.

[5] Despite the official ban on the practice of Devadasi in 1988, reports indicate that the custom persists covertly. Shockingly, in Karnataka alone, there are still approximately 23,000 Devadasis. Furthermore, since the ban, numerous women have been expelled from temples and left to endure even more challenging circumstances, exacerbating their already dire conditions (Hyslop 2010).

[6] Dalit women face a significantly higher risk of sexual assault and violence compared to upper-caste women, underscoring the heightened vulnerability resulting from their lower-caste status within a male-dominated society. Recognising the distinct nature of their deprivation and their position at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) has labelled them as 'Dalits among the Dalits' (Kannabiran 2012, p. 201). Additionally, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, enacted in 1989, acknowledges the gendered aspect of the caste experience, particularly for Dalit women. The act explicitly includes instances of sexual assault, non-consensual acts perpetrated through positions of power, forced nudity, and public humiliation—forms of violence commonly inflicted upon Dalit women in India (Rao 2001).

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