

Structural Violence and Systemic Oppression of Caste in Baburao Bagul's

'When I Hid My Caste'

Nagendrapramoth S¹, K. Thayalamurthy²

¹*Ph.D Research scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University*

²*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts and Science College, Thiruvennainallur*

This paper examines the concepts of structural violence and systemic oppression in Baburao Bagul's short story *When I Hid My Caste*, a seminal work that critiques the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies in Indian society. Bagul employs the nameless protagonist as a symbolic representation of the collective struggles faced by Dalits, highlighting the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination. The narrative explores how structural violence manifests through normalized cultural practices, social interactions, and institutional systems, ensuring that caste prejudice remains an unquestioned reality. The paper highlights the lived experiences of Dalit individuals, focusing on their social exclusion, economic marginalization, and psychological trauma. Bagul's narratives not only critique the societal systems that sustain inequality but also emphasize acts of resistance and agency among the oppressed. Portraying the psychological and emotional toll of systemic discrimination, his works reveal the profound human cost of caste-based hierarchies. This study underscores the enduring relevance of Bagul's critique of casteism, advocating for a deeper interrogation of cultural and institutional norms that sustain oppression. The findings contribute to broader discourses on social justice, equity, and the dismantling of entrenched hierarchies in modern societies.

Keywords: Structural violence, Dalit Oppression, Caste Discrimination, Social Inequality, Caste structures.

1. Introduction

The concept of Structural violence is introduced by Johan Galtung in the 1960s to describe a form of violence embedded within social structures and institutions that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, often along lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, or other identity markers. Structural violence, as described by Johan Galtung, operates through social, political, and economic structures that prevent subaltern groups from achieving their full potential. These structures are often normalized within dominant ideologies, making their violent impact invisible. Galtung defines structural violence as the “indirect violence” embedded in social, political, and economic systems that systematically disadvantage certain populations. Structural violence is often invisible and manifests through unequal access to resources, education, healthcare, and legal justice. Galtung emphasizes that this form of violence is insidious because it normalizes inequality and deprivation as part of the social order.

Structural violence in subaltern studies highlights the marginalization and oppression of subaltern groups by dominant social structures. It is an essential concept for understanding how entrenched social structures perpetuate harm and inequality. The term “subaltern” popularized by theorist Antonio Gramsci and later adopted by the Subaltern Studies. Ranajit Guha's broader framework on subalternity as discussed in his foundational essay, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*. In this essay, Guha critiques the elitist focus of traditional historiography and emphasizes the importance of examining the lives, struggles, and consciousness of marginalized groups who exist outside dominant power structures. Ranajit Guha, refers to marginalized communities and individuals are excluded from hegemonic power structures.

In subaltern studies, structural violence is not just an abstract concept; it is a lived reality that perpetuates the socio-economic and cultural subjugation of marginalized groups, such as Dalits, tribal communities, women, and minorities. It reflects deep-rooted inequalities in power and privilege and manifests in disparities in health, education, income, and other aspects of well-being. Structural violence is evident in caste-based hierarchies, particularly in the Indian context. Dalits and other oppressed castes face systemic exclusion from education, land ownership, and economic opportunities. This exclusion is normalized by cultural and religious practices that justify caste-based segregation, often leading to enduring cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. The caste system in India institutionalizes structural violence, perpetuating generational inequities and denying Dalits access to education, land, and social mobility. Gender intersects with caste, class, and ethnicity to create compounded forms of structural violence. Women from subaltern communities face additional layers of marginalization, such as lack of access to education, healthcare, and reproductive rights. The female characters often struggle against patriarchal systems that deny them agency, further exacerbated by their caste or class status. Baburao Bagul depict such systemic inequalities in his works, giving voice to those suffering under structural violence and challenging the socio-political status.

Systemic oppression is a form of discrimination and inequality that is deeply embedded within the structures and institutions of a society. It occurs when social, political, economic, and cultural systems are designed or maintained in ways that disadvantage specific groups based

on characteristics such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities. Despite isolated acts of bias, systemic oppression is pervasive and operates on a large scale, influencing laws, policies, institutional practices, and cultural norms. It refers to the deeply ingrained discrimination or mistreatment against certain groups based on race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities. Unlike individual acts of bias, systemic oppression is perpetuated through societal structures, including governments, legal frameworks, education systems, corporations, and cultural norms. These mechanisms create and sustain inequalities, normalizing disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and rights. Institutionalized practices, such as discriminatory policies, redlining, and unequal access to healthcare and education, reinforce these inequities, while cultural hegemony devalues marginalized identities. The effects of systemic oppression are intergenerational, often creating cycles of disadvantage that are difficult to break. Its impact is multifaceted, as individuals may face overlapping forms of discrimination—a concept known as intersectionality. Dealing with systemic oppression requires an intersectional approach that includes policy reform, redistribution of resources, education to raise awareness, and the empowerment of marginalized groups. Societies can pave the way for greater equity and justice. In Indian society the thought of Systemic oppression is deeply rooted in its historical, social, and cultural structures, manifesting across various domains such as caste, gender, religion, and economic class. It is perpetuated through entrenched hierarchies, institutional practices, and cultural norms, which reinforce inequality and restrict opportunities for marginalized groups.

In subaltern studies, Systemic oppression mainly focuses on the mechanisms through which marginalized groups are systematically excluded, exploited, and rendered voiceless within dominant socio-political and cultural frameworks. Subaltern studies, rooted in postcolonial and critical theory, seeks to understand and articulate the experiences of those on the peripheries of power, particularly in the context of caste, class, gender, and colonial histories. It is a lens to critique and dismantle the structures that sustain inequality and exclusion. It seeks to amplify subaltern voices, challenge hegemonic narratives, and reimagine a more inclusive social order. This perspective is particularly relevant in analysing literary works, social movements, and historical accounts that document the lived realities of marginalized communities.

2. Findings and Discussion

The concept of Structural Violence in the *When I Hid My Caste* is explored through the protagonist's harrowing experiences. The protagonist in Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* is not explicitly given a name in the story. This anonymity adds a universal dimension to the narrative, allowing the protagonist to represent the collective experiences of Dalits. His experiences are not unique but representative of Structural violence and systemic oppression endured by an entire community and the narrative universalizes the character's plight, making it a collective voice for the marginalized and oppressed. The concept refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals. It is an underlying current in this story, manifesting as caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and the perpetuation of inequality through cultural norms. The narrative recounts the protagonist's struggles with

being identified as a Dalit (an “Untouchable”) and the consequent stigma and prejudice. The incident where the protagonist is “found out” and faces hostility highlights how ingrained caste hierarchies dehumanize individuals, treating them as subhuman based solely on birth.

Caste-based discrimination in *When I Hid My Caste* is depicted through the protagonist's experiences of systemic prejudice and social alienation. The story portrays how a single mention of the protagonist's caste, “Mahar,” transforms him from an admired newcomer to a target of hostility, with the crowd shouting, “Smash the dirty dheda.” (Bagul 120). This dehumanization is further exemplified when securing housing becomes a challenge, as the landlord desperately seeks reassurance that he is of a “higher caste,” stating, “One can eat mud with a caste brother, but one shouldn't attend a feast with someone of a lower caste.” (Bagul 118). The protagonist and Kashinath face blatant discrimination, where caste determines their roles over merit or education. Kashinath is forced into menial labour, and when the protagonist defends him, he is met with derision, highlighting the entrenched belief that such jobs are reserved for Dalits. Concealing caste becomes a survival tactic for the protagonist, though it brings its own torment as he navigates a world where his identity could subject him to humiliation or violence. This is painfully evident in his betrayal by Ramcharan, whose devotion turns into rage upon discovering his caste, culminating in a brutal beating. The narrative underscores how caste-based discrimination pervades every facet of life, dictating relationships, opportunities, and personal dignity, leaving the oppressed with little choice but to endure or escape its suffocating grip. Through these episodes, the story lays bare the enduring legacy of casteism, critiquing its dehumanizing effects and calling for a reflection on its entrenched injustices.

Structural violence is evident in the protagonist's experiences of social alienation. The protagonist's journey highlights how social structures isolate individuals based on caste, denying them dignity and belonging. From the moment he sets foot in a new town, the seemingly mundane act of finding accommodation becomes fraught with caste-based challenges. The protagonist's struggle to conceal his caste becomes a mechanism to avoid exclusion, but it also forces him into a life of isolation and fear, cutting him off from meaningful connections. This isolation is starkly reflected in his relationship with Ramcharan, whose initial affection turns to violent rejection upon learning his caste and even within friendships, the protagonist feels the need to maintain a cautious distance, knowing that the revelation of his caste would lead to immediate ostracism. The story captures the psychological toll of social exclusion, as the protagonist laments,

I, who had once bathed in the crowded river of Mumbai's humanity who had watched people as silently as a butterfly so that I might know them better was now forced to crouch, weeping, in the cruel dark in order to conceal the secret of my caste. (Bagul 127)

Social exclusion, as represented in the story, is not merely about physical segregation but also about the emotional and societal barriers that dehumanize Dalits, depriving them of community, security, and equality. Through its poignant narrative, the story critiques the caste system's role in perpetuating exclusion and calls for a reimagining of social structures that uphold such injustices.

The internal anguish the protagonist faces, from hiding their caste to enduring humiliation and betrayal, underscores the pervasive psychological impact of structural violence. This form of

harm, though intangible, is deeply damaging and highlights the emotional weight of systemic oppression. The emotional and psychological toll of caste-based discrimination is profoundly depicted in *When I Hid My Caste*, illustrating the deep scars inflicted on the protagonist's psyche. The narrative delves into the constant anxiety and fear that accompany the concealment of his caste, a strategy he adopts to avoid the stigma and violence he knows will follow its revelation. This concealment, however, becomes a source of immense internal conflict, as he feels alienated not only from others but also from his true self. He describes his condition as "crouching, weeping, in the cruel dark," (Bagul 127) highlighting the loneliness and despair that come from living a double life. The protagonist's joy and confidence upon initially securing a job are shattered when his caste is discovered, leaving him emotionally paralyzed: "The joy, washing over my body, dried up. The tingly bubbles in my bloodstream evaporated." (Bagul 119) This metaphor captures the abruptness with which hope and happiness are replaced by dread and humiliation. The physical violence he endures at the hands of Ramcharan and others is a direct manifestation of the systemic oppression that targets his identity, but it is the betrayal by someone he trusted that cuts the deepest, compounding his sense of vulnerability and worthlessness. Furthermore, the story vividly portrays how the protagonist internalizes societal prejudice, leading to a constant state of vigilance and self-censorship. "I began to treat everyone with the utmost care. I measured every word and considered its effects," (Bagul 127) showing how the fear of exposure shapes his behaviour and interactions. The psychological impact extends to his relationship with Kashinath, as he struggles between solidarity and the need to protect his own precarious position. The constant battle between asserting his dignity and navigating a casteist society leaves the protagonist emotionally drained, encapsulating the unseen wounds inflicted by structural violence. The narrative not only lays bare the anguish of enduring such oppression but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate these cycles of emotional and psychological harm.

Despite the oppressive environment, the protagonist exhibits moments of resistance, articulating their worth and challenging societal norms. This resistance, however, is met with hostility, illustrating the challenges of confronting structural violence in deeply hierarchical systems. Resistance and agency are powerful undercurrents in *When I Hid My Caste*, as the protagonist and other characters navigate the oppressive structures of caste-based discrimination. Despite the immense social and psychological pressures, moments of defiance punctuate the narrative, showcasing the human spirit's resilience. The protagonist resists the dehumanizing effects of caste by asserting his identity in subtle yet profound ways, even as he hides his Dalit background. His response to the foreman's disdainful inquiry, "Who is Untouchable? Fire is untouchable. The sun is untouchable. Death is untouchable," (Bagul 122) is a poetic but scathing critique of the very foundation of caste hierarchies, affirming his intrinsic worth and dignity beyond societal labels. Kashinath, another significant character, embodies overt resistance, refusing to accept the menial tasks assigned to him because of his caste. His declaration, "I am a Mahar but that does not mean I'm going to clean human shit and piss from the walls," (Bagul 125) is a powerful act of defiance, challenging the normalized subjugation of Dalits to degrading labour. His confrontations with colleagues and supervisors, often laced with anger and frustration, underscore the everyday acts of rebellion that push back against systemic oppression. The protagonist's internal struggle also reflects agency, as he chooses to endure, strategize, and survive within a hostile environment, even finding moments to articulate the injustices he faces through eloquent speech and defiant silence. These acts of

resistance, though small and constrained by the realities of caste violence, collectively disrupt the societal expectation of Dalit subservience. However, the narrative does not romanticize this resistance, as it is fraught with personal cost—physical violence, emotional isolation, and a constant battle against despair. The story illuminates the protagonist's unwavering resolve to assert his humanity and the burgeoning awareness that change is possible, even in the face of entrenched oppression. This balance of resistance and agency becomes a poignant reminder of the courage it takes to challenge structural violence and the enduring quest for equality and dignity.

Cultural narratives and myths about purity and pollution perpetuate this structural violence. The text critiques these norms, showing how they are weaponized to maintain social control and justify inequality. In *When I Hid My Caste*, the perpetuation of structural violence through cultural norms is intricately portrayed, highlighting how traditions and beliefs sustain caste discrimination across generations. The narrative exposes how deeply entrenched cultural practices normalize exclusion and prejudice, making resistance an uphill battle. From the beginning, the protagonist encounters attitudes that reveal the pervasive influence of casteist ideologies. The casual inquiry, "When we meet a stranger, we always ask him his caste. This is the way in our country," (Bagul 118) demonstrates how caste identification is ingrained as a cultural reflex, shaping interactions and relationships. Such practices are not questioned but accepted as natural, reinforcing the divisions and hierarchies of the caste system. The story also critiques the use of cultural proverbs and idioms, such as, "One can eat mud with a caste brother, but one shouldn't attend a feast with someone of a lower caste," (Bagul 118) which justify and glorify segregation while stigmatizing inter-caste interactions. These sayings are wielded as tools to enforce conformity, marginalizing Dalits and restricting their mobility in society.

The belief in caste purity is another cultural norm that perpetuates violence, as seen in Ramcharan's violent outburst upon discovering the protagonist's caste. His anger is not merely personal but fueled by a cultural framework that views any breach of caste boundaries as contamination. The rituals surrounding food and domestic spaces become battlegrounds where caste superiority is asserted and Dalit bodies are deemed polluting. Even in the workplace, caste-based roles are justified through cultural narratives, as the protagonist and Kashinath are relegated to menial tasks because it is "the way things are." This normalization ensures that structural violence remains invisible, masked as tradition rather than oppression.

The story highlights how caste norms are perpetuated not only through individuals but also through collective behaviour. The mob mentality that erupts when the protagonist's caste is revealed underscores how deeply these cultural beliefs are embedded in community identity. Even those who initially show respect or kindness are quick to enforce caste boundaries when societal expectations demand it, illustrating the coercive power of cultural norms in maintaining the status quo. By portraying these dynamics, *When I Hid My Caste* reveals how cultural traditions serve as both the foundation and mechanism for sustaining structural violence, urging readers to interrogate and dismantle these oppressive norms.

The story serves as a poignant exploration of how structural violence manifests in everyday life, shaping interactions, opportunities, and individual destinies. Through its detailed portrayal of the protagonist's experiences, it not only sheds light on the enduring impact of

casteism but also challenges readers to reflect on the insidious nature of systemic oppression. The theme of systemic oppression is a cornerstone of *When I Hid My Caste*, illustrating the pervasive and institutionalized nature of caste-based discrimination. Systemic oppression, as portrayed in the story, operates through entrenched social hierarchies, cultural norms, economic barriers, and interpersonal dynamics that collectively marginalize and dehumanize Dalits.

The story delves into the normalization of caste hierarchies within society, revealing how systemic oppression becomes an accepted reality. This ingrained prejudice is reflected in the casual way caste identity is demanded, as exemplified by Ranchhod's query to the protagonist, accompanied by the statement, "This is the way in our country." (Bagul 118) Such normalization ensures that caste discrimination remains unquestioned and deeply embedded in everyday life.

The narrative illustrates how systemic oppression pervades all aspects of existence, from routine interactions to larger societal frameworks. The protagonist's ordeal begins with his refusal to disclose his caste, a seemingly simple act that triggers suspicion and bias. In a society where caste identity determines one's social worth, his resistance exposes the omnipresent power of caste in shaping opportunities and relationships. His struggle to navigate these prejudices highlights the insidious ways cultural habits and traditions perpetuate inequality, ensuring that oppression is woven seamlessly into the social fabric.

The workplace is a microcosm of systemic oppression in the story. Despite the protagonist's skills and education, his caste determines his value and the tasks assigned to him. Kashinath, another Dalit worker, is relegated to cleaning human waste, a role enforced by the foreman and accepted as natural by others. This occupational stratification underscores how institutions perpetuate caste hierarchies, limiting opportunities for Dalits to rise above their ascribed roles. At the heart of this oppression lies economic and occupational segregation. The protagonist and Kashinath face discrimination in the workplace, where roles are determined not by ability but by caste. Kashinath's protest against being assigned degrading tasks, such as cleaning human waste, highlights the rigid occupational roles enforced by systemic casteism. The protagonist's observation that "these menial jobs should not be given to educated workers" (Bagul 126) is dismissed with scorn, revealing how systemic oppression devalues Dalit labour and enforces a cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Institutional discrimination in *When I Hid My Caste* is powerfully illustrated through the protagonist's and Kashinath's experiences in the workplace, where caste-based hierarchies dictate roles, relationships, and opportunities. Kashinath, despite his potential and ambitions, is forced into degrading tasks like cleaning human waste, a role that is imposed upon him solely because of his caste. His defiant statement, "I am a Mahar, but that does not mean I'm going to clean human shit and piss from the walls," (Bagul 125) highlights the systemic enforcement of caste roles within institutions. The muqaddam's insistence that Kashinath perform such tasks reflects the normalized expectation that Dalits remain confined to menial jobs, regardless of their education or abilities. The protagonist, too, feels the weight of institutional discrimination, as his caste forces him to conceal his identity to avoid being relegated to a similarly demeaning position. When the foreman declares, "That's why these low castes get ahead" (Bagul 124) "tomorrow if that low-caste Kashinath wants, he can

become a clerk,” (Bagul 125) it reveals the deep-seated resentment against Dalits who seek to rise above their imposed roles, showcasing the resistance within institutions to social mobility for marginalized groups.

The protagonist observes how even minor errors made by Kashinath are treated with disproportionate hostility, as the workers and supervisors conspire to ostracize him. “Every day that dawned was a mountain of grief,” (Bagul 126) the protagonist reflects, describing the constant scrutiny and hostility Kashinath endures. This institutional culture not only enforces caste roles but also creates an environment of fear and exclusion, where Dalits are systematically devalued and vilified. The protagonist’s own struggle to navigate these structures is evident in his internal conflict, as he must weigh the need to retain his job against the humiliations and injustices he witnesses. “To hold on to my job, I told him my name as politely and respectfully as possible,” (Bagul 124) he admits, illustrating how institutional discrimination coerces Dalits into submission and silence. Through these vivid depictions and poignant quotes, the story critiques the role of institutions in perpetuating caste oppression. It reveals that such discrimination is not the result of individual prejudice alone but a systemic issue ingrained in organizational practices and cultural norms, demanding deep structural changes to ensure equity and justice.

The psychological impact of systemic oppression in *When I Hid My Caste* is deeply interwoven into the narrative, revealing how the constant threat of discrimination and violence shapes the inner lives of those marginalized by caste. The protagonist’s mental and emotional anguish begins with his decision to conceal his Dalit identity, a survival strategy that forces him into isolation and self-erasure. Reflecting on this burden, he laments, “I, who had once bathed in the crowded river of Mumbai’s humanity who had watched people as silently as a butterfly so that I might know them better was now forced to crouch, weeping, in the cruel dark in order to conceal the secret of my caste.” (Bagul 127) This imagery captures the crushing loneliness and fear of exposure, showing how systemic oppression compels individuals to suppress their true selves to avoid social and institutional violence.

The story explores the current psychological strain of this concealment, as the protagonist becomes hyper-vigilant in his interactions. “I began to treat everyone with the utmost care. Where I had once spoken with the freedom of the blowing wind, now I measured every word and considered its effects,” (Bagul 127) highlighting how systemic oppression infiltrates the mind, forcing him to constantly navigate the prejudices of others. His mental state deteriorates further when casteist attitudes surface, even in seemingly mundane encounters. For instance, when Ranchhod innocently asks, “What is your caste?” (Bagul 117) the protagonist’s initial joy and confidence are immediately replaced by dread: “The joy, washing over my body, dried up. The tingly bubbles in my bloodstream evaporated.” (Bagul 119) This transformation reveals the psychological cost of living in a society where one’s caste identity can trigger dehumanization and violence at any moment.

The betrayal and violence he experiences further exacerbate his psychological trauma. When Ramcharan, once a devoted friend, beats him upon discovering his caste, the protagonist’s silent endurance underscores the depth of his despair. “Through it all, not a word came from my mouth, not a tear fell from my eyes,” (Bagul 134) he recalls, illustrating how systemic oppression robs individuals of the ability to even protest their suffering. The cumulative impact

of these experiences is reflected in his growing sense of resignation and alienation: “My head was bowed, my walk uncertain. My heart was a city rich with revolution,” (Bagul 135) capturing the internal conflict between his desire to resist and the overwhelming burden of societal rejection.

Kashinath’s emotional turmoil represents another dimension of the psychological toll inflicted by systemic oppression. His admission, “If you had not been there to save me from all these fights, to protect me even, I would have killed both those demons,” (Bagul 129) reveals the profound frustration and helplessness of living under constant humiliation. The psychological scars are not limited to moments of confrontation but extend to the anticipation of future oppression, as both characters navigate a world where their dignity and humanity are perpetually under siege. Through these harrowing depictions, *When I Hid My Caste* exposes the deep psychological wounds inflicted by systemic oppression, emphasizing the need for structural and cultural change to alleviate the emotional and mental harm endured by marginalized communities.

In *When I Hid My Caste* social exclusion and cultural reinforcement emerge as critical tools of systemic oppression, ensuring the perpetuation of caste hierarchies through normalized practices and ingrained beliefs. The protagonist's experience vividly portrays how social exclusion isolates individuals based on caste, stripping them of community, dignity, and equality. The cultural imperative to disclose one’s caste, seen when Ranchhod asks, “What is your caste?” (Bagul 117) This is the way in our country, highlights how such seemingly mundane practices reinforce societal divisions. This casual demand is not an isolated act but a systemic mechanism to categorize and segregate individuals, ensuring that caste remains the determining factor in social interactions.

Cultural norms further deepen this exclusion by embedding casteism into everyday practices and language. When the landlord hesitates to rent to the protagonist, Devji justifies the exclusion with the adage, “One can eat mud with a caste brother, but one shouldn’t attend a feast with someone of a lower caste.” (Bagul 118) This proverb not only glorifies segregation but also vilifies inter-caste interactions, cementing the boundaries that keep Dalits marginalized. The protagonist’s struggle to conceal his identity is a direct response to this pervasive exclusion, as he knows that revealing his caste would instantly result in ostracism and hostility. The weight of these norms is evident in his reflection: “I, who had once bathed in the crowded river of Mumbai’s humanity. Who had watched people as silently as a butterfly so that I might know them better, was now forced to crouch, weeping, in the cruel dark in order to conceal the secret of my caste.” (Bagul 127) This metaphor underscores how social exclusion not only alienates Dalits from society but also deprives them of their sense of belonging and self-worth.

Cultural reinforcement of systemic oppression also manifests in the workplace, where caste roles are rigidly enforced. Kashinath’s refusal to perform degrading tasks assigned to him based on his caste. “I am a Mahar, but that does not mean I’m going to clean human shit and piss from the walls” (Bagul 125) challenges the entrenched belief that Dalits are destined for menial labour. His defiance is met with hostility from both his supervisors and peers, revealing how caste-based roles are upheld not just by individuals but by collective cultural attitudes. The mob mentality that surfaces when the protagonist’s caste is discovered further illustrates

the power of cultural reinforcement. “Smash the dirty dheda,” (Bagul 120) they shout, reflecting how societal norms sanction violence and exclusion against Dalits, transforming systemic oppression into a communal practice.

The story exposes how social exclusion and cultural reinforcement operate in tandem to sustain systemic oppression. Cultural narratives and practices ensure that caste hierarchies are accepted as natural and immutable, while social exclusion punishes those who challenge or deviate from these norms. By weaving these themes into the protagonist’s journey, *When I Hid My Caste* critiques the insidious ways in which systemic oppression is perpetuated through the very fabric of everyday life, urging readers to confront and dismantle these deeply rooted structures. Despite the overwhelming weight of systemic oppression, the story also highlights moments of resistance. The protagonist’s refusal to accept degrading treatment and Kashinath’s defiant assertion of his dignity show that while systemic oppression seeks to suppress, it cannot entirely extinguish the human spirit. These acts of defiance challenge the oppressive system, though they come at great personal cost.

In *When I Hid My Caste*, resistance within oppression emerges as a powerful theme, illustrating how individuals navigate systemic caste-based discrimination while asserting their dignity and humanity in the face of relentless hostility. The protagonist and Kashinath, despite being entrenched in a system designed to dehumanize them, find ways to resist and challenge the oppressive structures they face. The protagonist’s eloquent defiance is a striking example of this resistance. When confronted by the foreman about his caste, he retorts, “Who is Untouchable? Fire is untouchable. The sun is untouchable. Death is untouchable,” (Bagul 122) using poetic imagery to reject the labels imposed upon him. This moment underscores his refusal to internalize the stigma, asserting instead his intrinsic worth and strength beyond societal prejudices.

Kashinath, on the other hand, embodies overt defiance against systemic oppression. His declaration, “I am a Mahar, but that does not mean I’m going to clean human shit and piss from the walls,” (Bagul 125) challenges the entrenched belief that Dalits are destined for menial labour. His resistance is not without consequence, as it invites hostility from both supervisors and co-workers who are invested in maintaining the caste hierarchy. Kashinath’s acts of defiance, such as carrying a knife for protection and standing up to his oppressors, demonstrate the courage it takes to resist within a system that punishes any deviation from caste norms.

The protagonist’s internal resistance is equally compelling. While he conceals his caste to navigate the oppressive environment, this concealment itself becomes an act of rebellion against a system that would otherwise confine him to degrading roles. His ability to articulate his thoughts and critique the system, even in small moments, reflects his resilience. For instance, when he states, “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,” (Bagul 126) he draws attention to the systemic failures that perpetuate inequality, framing his survival as an act of defiance.

Resistance within oppression, however, comes at a cost. The protagonist reflects on the toll it takes, saying, “My head was bowed, my walk uncertain. My heart was a city rich with

revolution,” (Bagul 135) capturing the inner conflict between his desire to challenge the system and the exhaustion of enduring its weight. Similarly, Kashinath’s unrelenting rage and frustration highlight the emotional and psychological cost of living under constant attack. Despite these challenges, their acts of resistance disrupt the oppressive narrative and assert their right to dignity and humanity.

Through these moments, the story portrays resistance within oppression as both a necessity and a testament to the strength of the human spirit. It critiques the systemic structures that make such resistance essential, while celebrating the courage of individuals who fight to reclaim their agency in an unjust world. This theme ultimately calls for a deeper examination of the societal systems that force such resistance and the need to dismantle the structures that perpetuate inequality.

3. Conclusion

Bagul’s narrative masterfully delineates the ways in which systemic hierarchies manifest across economic, cultural, and institutional spheres, creating an environment of sustained marginalization for Dalits and other oppressed communities. Bagul critiques the social and cultural norms that normalize these oppressive practices, making the invisible mechanisms of structural violence painfully visible. While *When I Hid My Caste* exposes the crushing weight of systemic oppression, it also illuminates the resilience and agency of the oppressed. Acts of resistance, both overt and subtle, become a central motif in the narrative. Kashinath’s defiance against degrading tasks and the protagonist’s eloquent rebuttal of caste-based stigmas highlight the indomitable human spirit even in the face of overwhelming hostility. These moments of rebellion disrupt the narrative of Dalit subjugation, asserting the dignity and humanity of those marginalized by systemic oppression. However, Bagul does not romanticize this resistance; he portrays the personal cost of defiance, whether in the form of physical violence, emotional isolation, or the constant psychological toll of navigating a casteist society.

Bagul’s narrative ultimately serves as a call to action, urging readers to confront the entrenched social and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality. His work underscores the need for systemic change, advocating for policies, education, and societal reforms that address the root causes of caste-based discrimination. The story’s vivid portrayal of structural violence and systemic oppression challenges readers to recognize their complicity in these structures and to strive for a society where equity and justice are not ideals but realities.

In conclusion, *When I Hid My Caste* is not merely a reflection of the historical and cultural realities of caste oppression but also a powerful testament to the resilience of marginalized communities. Bagul’s work compels readers to acknowledge the deep scars left by systemic injustice and to commit to dismantling the structures that sustain it. By capturing both the anguish and resistance of the oppressed, the narrative serves as a timeless critique of inequality and a profound reminder of the urgent need for transformative social change.

References

1. Bagul, Baburao. *When I Hid My Caste*. Translated by Jerry Pinto, Speaking Tiger, 2018.
2. Beteille, Andre. *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. University of California Press, 1965.
3. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography." *American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 5, 1994, pp. 1475–1490.
4. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 1970.
5. Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167–191.
6. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
7. Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 1–8.
8. Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Beacon Press, 1965.
9. Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press, 1985.