



A Feminist Stylistic Reading of Baburao Bagul's *Mother*

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Abstract

This paper applies Sara Mills' framework of feminist stylistics to an Indian story *Mother* by Baburao Bagul to investigate how linguistic choices construct and contest gendered ideologies. In *Mother*, Bagul portrays a widow's marginalisation and moral scrutiny through community gossip and syntactic victimisation. The story also highlights the intersection of gender and socio-economic vulnerability. The paper emphasises the role of language in sustaining or resisting oppression. The protagonist's transformation through suffering reflects not just a personal narrative but a larger social indictment. The story provides a fertile ground for feminist stylistic analysis, particularly because it foregrounds female consciousness in settings structured by male-dominated traditions. Through a close examination of word choice, sentence structure, and discourse-level strategies, this study explores how gendered ideologies are linguistically encoded and whether these texts subvert or reinforce them. The study examines the pervasive use of derogatory language, the subtle mechanisms of agency and passivity in character portrayal, and the impact of focalisation on reader perception. By bringing feminist stylistics into conversation with these culturally rich narratives, this paper tries to create a deeper understanding of how language shapes gendered experiences in literature.

Mother, a Marathi Dalit short story by Baburao Bagul, explores the intersection of gender, and maternal identity.

Key Words: Feminist Stylistics, Sara Mills, Gender and Language, Baburao Bagul, Patriarchy.

The intricate relationship between language, gender, and power has long been a

focal point in literary and linguistic studies. Literature, as a powerful mirror and shaper of

society, often reflects and perpetuates, but also challenges, prevailing gender ideologies. Understanding how these ideologies are embedded within textual structures and linguistic choices is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of literary works. The stylistic choices made in literary texts are far from neutral; they are deeply embedded in ideological frameworks that shape how readers perceive gender, power, and identity.

Feminist stylistics, a field pioneered by Sara Mills, interrogates these choices to uncover the often-subtle ways in which texts reproduce or challenge patriarchal norms. This paper adopts Mills' feminist stylistic methodology to analyse *Mother* by Baburao Bagul which centrally focuses on a woman's experiences in a patriarchal society.

Baburao Bagul, a pioneering voice in Marathi Dalit literature, challenges dominant social narratives through his short story *Mother*. The story foregrounds the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women, who endure both caste-based discrimination and patriarchal subjugation. By exploring the lived realities of an unnamed Dalit widow and mother, Bagul questions the universalisation of motherhood ideals and highlights the marginalisation of subaltern women's experiences within society.

Mother centres on a Dalit woman struggling under the weight of poverty, caste prejudice, and gender violence. Her husband, debilitated by tuberculosis and addicted to alcohol, abuses her physically and emotionally, driven by suspicion and patriarchal control. As the sole breadwinner, the mother is caught between societal expectations of idealised motherhood and the harsh realities of survival. When Pandu, her son, attends school, he encounters classmates who mock his mother with slurs linking her to prostitution, revealing the entrenched perceptions about a woman who is single, beautiful and working mother. The story poignantly contrasts the traditional image of motherhood—as sacrificial and nurturing,

confined to the private sphere—with the lived experience of a Dalit mother forced to survive amidst the evil gazes of men, abuses of the wives whose men set their lustful eyes on the widowed mother. Through this narrative, Bagul exposes how gender biases invalidate diverse forms of motherhood and questions the possibility of emancipation for Dalit women.

Theoretical Framework.

Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistics* offers a critical and comprehensive approach to analysing texts, moving beyond traditional stylistic concerns. At its core, feminist stylistics, as defined by Mills, is an analytical method that "identifies itself as feminist and which uses linguistic or language analysis to examine texts" with the explicit aim "to draw attention to and change the way that gender is represented" (Mills 1). Mills critiques traditional stylistics for its purported objectivity and its tendency to treat texts as isolated, self-contained entities with a single, inherent meaning. She argues that such approaches often neglect the crucial "extratextual aspects" such as gender, race, class, and socio-economic factors that profoundly influence both the production and reception of texts. For Mills, language is not a neutral or transparent medium; rather, it is a "material entity which may in fact shape those ideas" and "impose structure on our perceptions of the world" (Mills 6). Consequently, a feminist stylistic analysis meticulously examines systematic language choices to expose how they "serve the interests of some people to the detriment of others" (Mills 6). The ultimate goal is to make readers aware of oppressive "ideologies of gender difference" embedded within the text (Mills 6).

Mills proposes a "toolkit" approach, offering a series of "questions which can be directed at any text" to uncover its underlying messages and reveal how "point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender" (Mills 1, 12). This systematic

questioning allows for a deeper textual engagement than a superficial reading focused solely on subject matter. The analysis can be conducted at various linguistic levels:

- **Word Level:** While acknowledging the contextual nature of word meaning, Mills suggests that "certain words concerning gender difference do seem to reflect an overall gender bias" and can be analysed in relative isolation (Mills 117). This includes examining lexical choices, epithets, and recurring metaphors associated with gender stereotypes that might "skew the interpretation of a text" (Mills 6).
- **Phrase/Sentence Level:** At this level, the focus shifts to "grammatical choices" and syntactic structures. Mills explores how sentence construction, such as the use of active or passive voice, can attribute or deny agency, thereby reflecting gendered power dynamics (Mills 12).
- **Discourse Level:** This encompasses "larger structures within texts such as narrative, plot, focalisation and schemata" (Mills 14). Here, feminist stylistics considers the broader contextual properties that affect interpretation, including the "dialectical interrelationship between language and social structure" (Mills 14). This involves analysing how narrative strategies position the reader and shape their understanding of gender roles and conflicts.

Crucially, Mills emphasises the reader's active role in interpretation, highlighting the "interaction between the text and the reader in the production of interpretations" (Mills 52). She notes that interpretations can vary significantly "depending on the reader's gender-identity" (Mills 6). Furthermore, Mills points out that "women's writing is read differently from male writing" due to differing value systems and marketing strategies, underscoring the external factors influencing reception (Mills 49).

Ultimately, feminist stylistics, for Mills, is inherently political. It stems from a "commitment to changing the social structure to make it less oppressive to women, and, for that matter, to men" (Mills 3). By providing readers with the skills and knowledge to critically engage with texts, Mills's framework empowers them to challenge "commonsense notions of gender" and deconstruct "retrograde" constructions of gender roles, fostering a more critical and informed engagement with literature and society.

Literature Review

Feminist literary criticism in the Indian context has traditionally focused on thematic content—examining issues such as patriarchy, domesticity, sexuality, and resistance in women's lives—without always attending to the linguistic mechanisms through which such issues are textualised. Indian feminist critics such as Susie Tharu, K. Lalitha, and C.S. Lakshmi have provided crucial insights into women's representation in Indian literature, yet their methods are largely literary and sociological rather than stylistic.

Baburao Bagul's *Mother* has primarily been analysed through the lens of Dalit aesthetics and social realism. Scholars such as Arjun Dangle and Eleanor Zelliot have noted the radical social critique embedded in Bagul's stories but have not examined his stylistic strategies for representing gender.

A few scholars have begun bridging the gap between language and ideology in Indian literature, drawing from critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics, but a full integration of feminist stylistics remains lacking. This paper addresses that gap by applying Mills' toolkit for feminist stylistic analysis to *Mother* and *Widow*, revealing how language is not only a vehicle for meaning but also a site and cause of struggle and oppression.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative textual analysis, guided by the framework of feminist stylistics developed by Sara Mills. The methodology involves a systematic, close reading of *Mother* by Baburao Bagul at multiple linguistic levels to investigate how gender ideologies are encoded and challenged through language.

Analysis

Baburao Bagul's short story *Mother* is a profoundly disturbing yet deeply empathetic portrayal of a woman's struggle against patriarchal cruelty, sexual objectification, and class oppression. The story interrogates the sanctity of "motherhood" in a society where poverty, widowhood, and female beauty automatically become grounds for moral suspicion and abuse.

1. Word-Level Analysis: Naming, Euphemism, and Lexical Violence

Mills stresses that language is not a neutral medium, and gendered lexical choices often function ideologically. In *Mother*, naming and abuse are the most obvious linguistic sites of oppression.

- **Lexical Violence:** Pandu's mother is frequently called *slut*, *whore*, *tart*, *witch*, *temptress*, and *pimp's mother*. These words are used not only by adults (Dagdu, neighbours), and by children (Kishan) but also by her own son Pandu, showing how misogynistic vocabulary circulates socially and intergenerationally. Obscenities become normalised ways of "explaining" women's existence. These terms serve to strip her of dignity, define her solely by her perceived sexual conduct, and delegitimize her existence within the community. Mills would argue that such lexical choices are not arbitrary but actively "skew the interpretation of a text" by forcing a negative, gendered judgment upon the female character (Mills 6).

- **Implied Sexual Transgression:** Phrases like "sleeps with the Mukadam" and "giving it on credit now, are you?" (from the husband) are indirect but clear accusations of prostitution or infidelity. The repeated emphasis on her "business" and "five rupees for each customer" reinforces the community's commodification of her body.
- **Gendered Slurs and Agency Removal:** Interestingly, Pandu is feminised through slurs like "petticoat," "sissy," and "pimp" – terms meant to emasculate by associating him with femininity. This reflects what Mills identifies as the strategic use of femininity as a mark of inferiority in language.
- **Lexical Irony:** The title *Mother* stands in sharp contrast to the slurs hurled at the protagonist. While "mother" is traditionally sanctified in Indian cultural discourse, here it becomes a battleground between idealised expectations and lived realities. Mills notes that such contradictions are sites where gender ideologies become visible and challengeable.
- **Mother's Physicality and "Beauty":** The narrative states, "She was beautiful, desirable which automatically meant that perhaps she consistently sold her beauty, gave it way for a price" (Bagul 416) Here, "beautiful" and "desirable" are stripped of positive connotations; society, through its ingrained patriarchal lens, automatically interprets them as signs of promiscuity or a commodity for sale. Her "new sari and blouse" and "new silver chain" are not symbols of self-care but become further "proof" of her supposed "business," leading to jeers.
- **Verbs of Male Control/Violation:** The husband's actions towards his wife are characterized by verbs such as "strip her," "examine her," "scrutinize her," "search for money," "taunt her," and the horrific intent to "brand her naked body with the hot iron."

These verbs illustrate a profound level of control, suspicion, and physical violation. Similarly, the "men stripped her bare in their mind's eye" and Dagdu's attempt to "remov[e] her clothes" demonstrate a pervasive male gaze that seeks to violate and humiliate.

2. Phrase and Sentence-Level Analysis: Transitivity and Syntactic Control

At the sentence level, Mills encourages looking at how agency is constructed or suppressed through grammar. Bagul masterfully uses transitivity patterns and modality to reflect the mother's fractured agency and Pandu's psychological deterioration.

- **Passive Victimhood:** Many sentences describing Pandu's mother are passive or lack an agent: "She was looked at with suspicion," "She was thrown down," "She was harassed." These grammatical choices reflect a world where the woman has no control over how she is treated; she is a constant object of surveillance, aggression, and violation.

The mother is frequently depicted as the object of action rather than the subject. For instance, "She was looked at with suspicion by her irresponsible husband," and "Men were drawn to her; she did not want them. They tried rape and their women wages a far of slander against her" (Bagul 417). In these instances, she is acted upon, highlighting her vulnerability and lack of control over her reputation and body.

- **Interrupted Agency:** Where active verbs are used for her—e.g., "She cooked," "She bathed," "She held the mirror"—they often depict mundane or solitary activities. When she tries to assert agency (e.g., working at construction sites, defending Pandu), her actions are mocked, sexualised, or violently obstructed.

Her own agency is often expressed through desperate or reactive actions: "she had pleaded

with him," "she actively wished for his death" (Bagul 417), "demanded her conjugal rights, (Bagul 417)" and "She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. (Bagul 420)" These are actions taken from a position of profound disempowerment, rather than proactive choice.

- **Pandu's Emotional Arc in Syntax:** Initially, Pandu "started defending his mother stoutly," showing his active agency. However, this gives way to "Rage gave way to infinite helplessness, and he felt spent, (Bagul 412)" indicating a shift to passivity and defeat imposed by societal pressure.

Pandu's descent from rage to helplessness is marked by fragmented, emotionally loaded syntax. His accusations ("Whore! I spit on your clothes! (Bagul 419)") shift from being about others' opinions to internalized disgust. Mills highlights such transitions as moments where readers may see how male emotions are shaped by gendered expectations of women's purity.

- **Direct Abuse and Accusation:** The prevalence of direct quotes like "Don't touch Pandu, any of you. my mother says, Pandu's mother sleeps with the Mukadam like this...(Bagul 411-12)" and "You bloody pimp. ...The gang was waiting for him outside. They shouted out their abuse against Pandu's mother... (Bagul 412)" makes the societal condemnation explicit and visceral. This direct address emphasizes the public nature of the mother's humiliation and the direct assault on her character.
- **Husband's Accusatory Language:** The husband's questions and taunts—"Your sari looks as if you've worn it in a hurry, your hair's coming loose, where were you, slut?" and "Giving it on credit now, are you(Bagul 416)" —are not genuine inquiries but rhetorical accusations, designed to corner and blame her,

reinforcing his dominance and suspicion.

- **Bagul's Sentence Structure Describing the Mother's Actions:** The lines "She went straight to cook, served me supper silently, and then went to bed like a small child talking to herself, smiling quietly to herself. She did not sit by me when I ate, did not ask me how I was" (Bagul 413) reveal a change in her routine, perceived by Pandu. The simple, sequential verbs highlight her mechanical, almost detached actions, suggesting an inner turmoil or a new, concealed life. The description "like a small child talking to herself, smiling quietly to herself" conveys a sense of fragile, almost secretive, internal world.

3. Discourse-Level Analysis: Reader Positioning, Narrative Voice, and Ideological Conflict

At the level of discourse, Mills emphasizes narrative perspective, focalization, and reader positioning. In *Mother*, these elements are deliberately unstable, inviting both empathy and judgment before finally rupturing into despair.

- **Focalization and the Male Gaze:** The story is primarily focalized through Pandu's perspective, especially in the initial sections. His confusion, shame, rage, and eventual betrayal are central. However, this male-centred focalization initially presents the mother through the lens of societal gossip and accusations. The narrative also introduces moments of explicit male gaze from the community: "The entire street was transfixed by her undulating walk. The men stripped her bare in their mind's eye, the women burned with envy, but couldn't help looking. (Bagul 415)" This phrase powerfully illustrates the objectification of the mother, where her body becomes public property, mentally violated by men and judged by women.

- **The Narrative's Shifting Perspective (Mother's Flashback):** A crucial shift occurs when the mother's past is revealed, offering a counter-narrative to the societal accusations. Her flashback exposes the true torment inflicted by her husband—his constant suspicion, physical and verbal abuse, and the horrific attempt to brand her. This narrative move allows the reader to understand her suffering and challenges the simplistic "whore" label imposed by others. It reveals the root of her present "unprotected" widowhood and why she might seek solace or security, however problematic.
- **Shifting Focalization:** The narrative focalizes alternately through Pandu and his mother. Through Pandu's eyes, the reader feels the shame, confusion, and moral panic of a child subjected to communal gossip and toxic masculinity. Through the mother's memory, we experience marital rape, public humiliation, and social suffocation. This dual focalization deepens the tragedy by refusing to villainize either character.
- **Emotional Manipulation and Reader Sympathy:** The story positions readers to sympathize with the mother's suffering. Her flashbacks—of branding threats, forced sex with her dying husband, and relentless surveillance—compel the reader to view her not as a "fallen woman" but as a survivor. Mills states that feminist stylistic analysis "allows us to see the options available to subjects in terms of the construction of subject positions or roles" (Mills 9), which is precisely what Bagul does by layering the mother's role as worker, victim, protector, and woman.
- **Socio-economic Vulnerability and Commodification of Female Body:** Mills emphasises the importance of socio-economic factors in gender analysis. The mother's status as an "unprotected widow" and her need to work "hauling bricks and

cement" immediately highlight her economic vulnerability. This vulnerability is directly exploited by men who see her "beauty" as something to be bought. Mohammed Maistry's car, Walji Seth's fifty-rupee notes, and Dagdu's "life's savings" are all presented as transactional offers for her body, underscoring the severe lack of options for a widowed woman in her social standing. Her "business" isn't chosen; it's a desperate measure forced by economic necessity and societal pressure.

- **Ideological Conflict and Gendered Guilt:** The story subtly raises crucial feminist questions: Why is a widow denied the right to joy or pleasure in her life? Why must a woman carry the burden of guilt even for her smallest happiness? Why is she expected to remain forever self-sacrificing, even when abandoned by family and society? These questions are not posed directly but are embedded in the contradictions of her experience: she is condemned for being desirable, yet her suffering is invisible.
- **Narratives that Dehumanize:** The role of communal narrative is especially devastating. Had Pandu been able to see his mother as a struggling, loving, and resilient parent, would he not have been proud of her? Instead, the society's prejudiced storytelling reframes her as a sexual being rather than a nurturing mother. The collective gaze of the community, its obscenities, and its policing of female behaviour reconstruct her image in Pandu's eyes—transforming mother into "woman." His internalised misogyny stems not from direct experience but from others' words: *"My mother has certainly changed... (Bagul 415)"*
- **Family as an Ideological Agent:** The family system, too, emerges as a site of ideological conditioning. The husband, instead of being a partner, becomes a controller of her

body—scrutinising her, accusing her, and eventually attempting to brand her. His joblessness and alcoholism are normalised, but her widowhood becomes the reason for suspicion. The system expects her to suffer silently, work endlessly, and offer no protest even when raped or beaten.

- **Society's Double Standards:** While a woman's desire is treated with shame, a man's carnal instincts—even when violent—are tolerated or trivialised. A beautiful widow is deemed immoral, while an unemployed drunkard is never morally judged. A woman is doubted if she returns late; a man is pitied if he is alone. Pandu too is influenced by Dagdu. He does not ask anything to his mother. These asymmetries are embedded in societal speech acts and reproduced through everyday language, as Mills observes in her critique of "commonsense" expressions.
- **Lack of Female Solidarity:** Importantly, the story exposes the failure of female solidarity. Women in the neighbourhood laugh at her, envy her, and contribute to her isolation. Mills notes that "gender ideologies are not simply imposed by men; women, too, participate in their perpetuation—consciously or unconsciously." Here, women themselves are vehicles of patriarchal judgment.
- **Internalized Misogyny and Societal Complicity:** The narrative vividly portrays how misogynistic beliefs are internalized not just by men but also by women, and by Pandu himself. The "boys around him repeated the gossip they'd heard at home," (Bagul 412) and the "few more women came out, showed him sympathy and stood about abusing his mother" (Bagul 415). This demonstrates the widespread societal complicity in shaming and ostracizing the mother, creating an oppressive environment where her son eventually turns against her. Pandu's cry "Whore! I spit

on your clothes" (Bagul 419) represents the ultimate betrayal, an internalization of the very abuse he initially fought against.

- **Limited Agency and Desire for Self-preservation:** The mother's internal monologue at the end reveals her suffering: "You've all tortured me - you, your father, the men in this street - also the women" (Bagul 419). This is a powerful articulation of her lack of agency and the collective oppression she faces. Her statement "I lived for you, hoping you'd grow up, be my support, but you have betrayed me" (Bagul 419) shows her deep emotional investment in Pandu, which he ultimately shatters. However, the narrative also provides a glimpse of her own suppressed desire: "out of the hunger of the past ten years of widowhood, flared an uncontrollable desire" (Bagul 420). This moment, while leading to Pandu's final heartbreak, also signifies a complex reclaiming of her own physicality and needs, albeit within a fraught and exploitative context. Her desperate struggle to escape the overseer at the very end reinforces her fight for bodily autonomy.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistics*, Baburao Bagul's "Mother" emerges as a searing indictment of patriarchal societal structures and their profound impact on women. The story demonstrates how language, through derogatory lexical choices and power-laden syntactic structures, actively constructs and reinforces oppressive gender roles. The pervasive male gaze and societal judgment, amplified by community gossip, define the mother's identity solely through her perceived sexuality, denying her humanity and agency. The narrative's shifting focalization ultimately exposes the hypocrisy of these judgments by revealing the backstory of her suffering at the hands of her abusive husband and the desperate socio-economic circumstances that compel her

choices. The tragic trajectory of Pandu, who internalises societal misogyny and ultimately rejects his mother, further underscores the devastating and cyclical nature of gender-based oppression, making the story a powerful example of how texts can reveal and challenge deeply ingrained "ideologies of gender difference" (Mills 6).

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