

Trauma And Memory: Subaltern Experience In Baburao Bagul's *Streetwalker*

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Abstract

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, often causing lasting emotional, psychological, or physical effects. Memory is the ability to store, retain, and recall information, experiences, and knowledge over time. This article explores the complex interplay of trauma and memory within the framework of subaltern experiences, through the short story *Streetwalker* as a contextual analysis. Girja, the protagonist, embodies the dual burden of systemic oppression and personal grief as she navigates life as a marginalized sex worker. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, this paper explores how Girja's traumatic experiences and memories are inscribed on her body and psyche, creating a cycle of pain and resilience. The narrative captures the fragmentation and repetition characteristic of traumatic memory, highlighting the ways in which Girja's maternal love and memories of her son both fuel her endurance and deepen her anguish. Girja's story highlights the intersection of personal and structural violence, reflecting the voicelessness and invisibility imposed upon subaltern subjects while also revealing moments of resistance and agency. Analysing the representation of trauma as both a psychological phenomenon and a socio-political construct, this article situates *Streetwalker* within broader discussions of power, memory, and resilience in subaltern studies. It argues that the narrative foregrounds the enduring human spirit in the face of systemic erasure and trauma, emphasizing memory as both a source of suffering and a vehicle for subaltern resistance.

Keywords: Marginalized life, Traumatic Memory, Psychological Pain, Power Dynamics, Subaltern studies.

Introduction

The relationship between trauma and memory is central to understanding the experiences of marginalized communities. Cathy Caruth conceptualized Trauma as the persistent intrusion of a past event that defies full integration into the conscious mind. Memory, conversely serves as both a site of anguish and a means of negotiating identity, particularly for those whose lives are shaped by systemic oppression. Through the lens of subaltern studies, the exploration of trauma and memory becomes even more complex, intersecting with issues of voicelessness, erasure, and survival within oppressive socio-political structures. This paper investigates these themes within the narrative of *Streetwalker*, a story that captures the life of Girja, a sex worker navigating the intersecting forces of poverty, patriarchy, and societal stigma.

Trauma theory provides a robust framework for analysing Girja's experiences, as it foregrounds the ways in which traumatic events disrupt normal patterns of thought and behaviour. Caruth's notion of trauma as "the unclaimed experience" underscores the fragmentation and repetition in Girja's narrative. Her suffering, both physical and psychological, illustrates how trauma is embodied and relived in daily life. Her memories, particularly those of her son, reveal the dual nature of memory as a source of pain and resilience. Girja's story demonstrates how memories of loss and love sustain her through profound adversity, even as they magnify her anguish in moments of despair.

Subaltern studies, as articulated by Gayatri Spivak and others, complements trauma theory by emphasizing the silencing of marginalized voices within dominant narratives. Girja's role as a sex worker situates her within a system that perpetuates her marginalization while denying her dignity and agency. Her experiences highlight the structural violence inflicted on subaltern subjects, as well as their strategies for survival and resistance. In *Streetwalker*, Girja's inability to publicly grieve for her son or articulate her trauma reflects the silencing of the subaltern, while her moments of defiance reveal the potential for agency even within oppressive systems.

This paper aims to bridge trauma theory and subaltern studies to offer a nuanced reading of Girja's story. Trauma and memory shape her identity and actions, it situates her experiences within broader discussions of power, resistance, and resilience. Girja's narrative not only illuminates the psychological and physical toll of systemic oppression but also challenges readers to confront the enduring impact of trauma on subaltern lives. This analysis underscores the importance of recognizing memory as a multifaceted phenomenon that both exacerbates and mitigates the suffering of marginalized individuals.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study combines insights from trauma theory and subaltern studies to analyse the interplay of trauma and memory within the subaltern experience depicted in *Streetwalker*. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a deeper understanding of how systemic oppression and individual suffering intersect, shaping the lives and

identities of marginalized individuals like Girja. The analysis in these theoretical paradigms illuminates the complex dynamics of voicelessness, resilience, and agency in the context of subaltern trauma.

Caruth describes trauma as “an event that is not fully assimilated as it occurs,” (Caruth 4) highlighting its resistance to conventional narrative integration. Traumatic memory is thus characterized by its compulsive return in the form of flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and repetitive behaviours. This framework is particularly relevant to *Streetwalker*, where Girja’s life reflects the cyclical and unresolved nature of trauma. Her traumatic experiences are ranging from systemic marginalization to the abusive encounters with clients—are repeatedly inscribed on her body and psyche. The physical torment she endures becomes a tangible manifestation of her emotional suffering, while her attempts to perform normalcy, such as beautifying herself or engaging in work rituals, reveal the difficulty of integrating trauma into daily life. Her memories of her son, intertwined with her present struggles, further illustrate the persistence of trauma as a lived reality, shaping her actions and emotions in profound ways.

LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” and “working through” trauma also offers a valuable framework for understanding Girja’s behavior. Acting out, characterized by the compulsive repetition of traumatic events, is evident in Girja’s cycles of self-presentation and self-neglect. However, moments of agency, such as her confrontation with the man who robs her, suggest attempts to “work through” her trauma by asserting control over her circumstances. These oscillations between acting out and working through underscore the complexities of trauma in subaltern lives.

Subaltern studies, rooted in the work of scholars like Gayatri Spivak, focus on the silencing and erasure of marginalized voices within dominant historical and social narratives. Spivak’s seminal question, “*Can the subaltern speak?*” underscores the difficulty of articulating subaltern experiences in systems that deny them recognition and agency. This perspective is crucial for understanding Girja’s plight in *Streetwalker*, where her identity as a sex worker renders her invisible and voiceless in the eyes of society. Girja’s inability to publicly express her grief over her son’s death reflects the systemic silencing of subaltern subjects. Her marginalized status not only denies her the dignity of mourning but also compels her to prioritize survival over self-expression. The societal disdain she faces, compounded by the violence and exploitation in her profession, highlights the structural forces that perpetuate her trauma. Her encounters with clients, the restaurant owner, and even other marginalized individuals, such as the old woman in the garden, reveal the layers of oppression that constrain her life. Subaltern studies also recognize the potential for resistance within these systems of oppression. Girja’s moments of defiance, such as her attempt to warn the old woman about the abusive client or her confrontation with the man who robs her, signify acts of agency that challenge her subjugation. These moments, though fleeting, reflect the resilience and resourcefulness of subaltern individuals in navigating their constrained realities.

Findings and Discussions

The intersection of trauma theory and subaltern studies provides a holistic framework for analyzing Girja’s experiences. Trauma theory emphasizes the psychological and emotional dimensions of her suffering, while subaltern studies contextualize this suffering within broader systems of power and marginalization. These perspectives reveal the interplay of individual and systemic trauma, highlighting how Girja’s pain is both a personal burden and a product of structural violence. Memories of her son are not only a source of personal grief but also a reminder of the socio-economic conditions that forced her into her current circumstances. Her repetitive attempts to beautify herself and attract clients reflect both the internalization of societal expectations and the external pressures of survival. The moments of defiance in the narrative rooted in personal experiences, also challenge the systemic forces that seek to erase her voice and agency.

In *Streetwalker*, Girja’s life as a sex worker offers a stark depiction of systemic oppression and marginalization, underscoring how structural forces perpetuate trauma and erasure for subaltern subjects. Trauma theory and subaltern studies together illuminate the ways in which Girja’s suffering is both personal and socio-political, shaped by intersecting forces of gender, class, and societal stigma. Her status as a marginalized sex worker places her in a precarious position, where she is denied dignity and agency by those around her. This systemic oppression is evident in her interactions with the restaurant owner, who dismisses her grief over her son’s death, stating, “I’ve given you a lot of credit already. Go now,” (Bagul 34) despite her desperate plea for help. His indifference highlights the societal disregard for the emotional needs of subaltern individuals, who are seen solely through the lens of their utility or expendability. Trauma theory emphasizes that such systemic neglect compounds psychological suffering, as it denies individuals the space to process and articulate their pain. Her profession exposes her to both physical and emotional violence, reflecting the broader patriarchal and classist systems that exploit her vulnerability. The physical torment she endures from clients, coupled with their transactional view of her body, mirrors what Gayatri Spivak describes as the subaltern’s “voicelessness”—an inability to articulate or challenge the violence inflicted upon them. Girja’s internalization of this oppression is evident in her repeated attempts to beautify herself, even as her mind resists, described poignantly as, “Her lips would not redden. Her face would not brighten. Her mind would not lighten.” (Bagul 35) These moments illustrate the disjunction between Girja’s inner anguish and the external performance demanded by her marginalized role.

Trauma theory also sheds light on how systemic oppression is inscribed on Girja’s body. The story describes her as making her body “a stone” to endure the abuse inflicted by a client, an act of survival that dehumanizes her further. This endurance, while a testament to her resilience, reflects the repetitive nature of trauma, where survival often necessitates the suppression of emotions and identity. Girja’s body becomes a site of both survival and erasure, embodying the intersection

of personal and structural violence. The moments of defiance in the narrative underscore Girja's agency, albeit constrained by her circumstances. Her confrontation with the man who robs her reveals the simmering rage and resilience of a subaltern subject forced to navigate a world of constant exploitation. Her demand, "Drop that money!" (Bagul 42) signifies a refusal to be completely subjugated, even as her systemic marginalization renders such resistance fraught and fleeting.

In *Streetwalker*, systemic oppression manifests as a constellation of societal neglect, patriarchal violence, and economic exploitation. Through the lens of trauma theory and subaltern studies, Girja's story becomes a powerful testament to the enduring impact of structural violence on marginalized individuals, while also revealing the small but significant acts of resistance that disrupt this erasure. These insights compel a deeper recognition of the layered and often invisible suffering of subaltern subjects in oppressive systems.

The body, as depicted in *Streetwalker*, serves as both a site of trauma and a medium for survival, embodying the repetitive nature of Girja's suffering as a subaltern subject. Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma as a compulsive return to unprocessed pain, illuminates how Girja's experiences are inscribed on her body and psyche. This repetition of physical and emotional torment underscores the systemic oppression she endures, while also highlighting the complexities of her survival.

Girja's repeated acts of beautification before engaging in her trade despite her despair exemplify the embodied nature of trauma. The narrative describes her attempts to prepare for work after learning of her son's death: "She scrubbed her face, oiled her hair, and painted her lips, but her face would not brighten. Her mind would not lighten." (Bagul 35) These rituals, driven by necessity rather than desire, reveal the compulsion to maintain a facade of normalcy in the face of overwhelming grief. Trauma theory explains this as an act of "acting out," where the traumatized subject engages in repetitive behaviours that mimic the original pain without resolving it.

The physical abuse Girja endures further exemplifies how her body becomes a repository of trauma. The text vividly recounts her encounter with a violent client: "She made her body into a stone and bore the terrible pain he inflicted on her." (Bagul 42) This act of dehumanization—rendering herself emotionally numb to survive—is both a coping mechanism and a reflection of systemic violence. Trauma, as Dominick LaCapra suggests, often becomes somatic, inscribed on the body through repeated violations that mirror the unresolved anguish of the psyche.

Repetition also shapes Girja's emotional responses to her circumstances. She rationalizes her suffering as a means to an end, believing that the money earned will help her reach her son. This internalized cycle of pain and justification reflects how trauma perpetuates itself, compelling the subject to endure repeated harm in the hope of future relief. As the narrative states, "She gave over her body to the satisfaction of every one of his twisted desires," (Bagul 42) demonstrating the intersection of physical violence and psychological endurance.

Girja exhibits moments of resistance. When the bespectacled man attempts to rob her, her body previously rendered passive becomes animated by rage: "Her eyes filled with the rage of the serpent. Her face grew red with anger." (Bagul 42) This sudden transformation underscores the capacity for agency within the confines of trauma, even as her systemic marginalization limits the sustainability of such resistance. Her body becomes a battlefield where trauma is both inflicted and resisted, embodying the repetitive nature of her suffering and her struggle for survival. Through the lens of trauma theory, her story reveals the inescapable cycles of pain that define subaltern experiences, while also highlighting the moments of agency that disrupt this cycle. Girja's narrative compels us to recognize the embodied dimensions of trauma, where physical and emotional pain are intertwined in the lives of marginalized individuals. Her maternal memory functions as both a source of anguish and a driving force that propels her survival amidst systemic oppression and personal trauma. Her memories of her son, though burdened with grief, serve as a catalyst for her actions, shaping her resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming adversity. Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's concept of memory as a site of unprocessed pain, provides a framework for understanding how her maternal identity intertwines with her trauma, driving her to endure and resist.

The memory of her son pervades Girja's thoughts, intensifying her suffering while also motivating her actions. Upon receiving the telegram bearing the devastating news of his illness, her world is consumed by grief: "Every cell of her body was ripe with grief." (Bagul 34) her maternal instinct compels her to continue working, viewing her labour as a means to reach him. This reflects the dual nature of traumatic memory as an unrelenting source of emotional pain and as a force that drives agency and purpose. Her maternal memory shapes her encounters with clients, as she rationalizes her suffering for the sake of her son. When enduring physical and emotional abuse at the hands of a violent client, she perceives her pain as an offering to a higher purpose:

She made her body into a stone and bore the terrible pain he inflicted on her. Now she not only had money to go to the village but for the medicines as well. (Bagul 42)

Here, Girja's maternal identity becomes a site of resistance against despair, transforming her body into a vessel of sacrifice for her child's well-being. Her maternal memory continues to haunt her, after learning of her son's death, driving her rage and despair. The narrative poignantly captures her final realization: "The owner of the restaurant had lied to her. Her son had died. He was dead." (Bagul 43) This moment of reckoning magnifies her grief, but it also evokes a surge of anger and strength when she confronts the man attempting to rob her.

Her upper lip peeled back to her nose and became a straight line. In her muscles, strength began to gather. Her eyes filled with the rage of the serpent. (Bagul 42)

This rage, born from maternal love and the loss of her son, exemplifies how memory can transform grief into defiance, disrupting the cycles of marginalization and erasure. Her maternal memory ultimately underscores the complexities of trauma as both a debilitating and empowering force. It illustrates how the subaltern's personal grief is intertwined with systemic oppression, where maternal love becomes a site of both suffering and resistance. Her story reveals the enduring power of memory to shape identity and motivate agency, even within the confines of structural violence and trauma. Through Girja's maternal devotion, *Streetwalker* offers a poignant exploration of the transformative potential of memory in subaltern experiences.

In *Streetwalker*, Girja's memories, particularly those tied to her maternal identity, act as a vehicle for agency within the confines of her subaltern status. While her existence is marked by systemic oppression and exploitation, her memories of her son serve as both a source of pain and a wellspring of strength, enabling her to assert control over her circumstances in fleeting but significant ways. Through these moments, the narrative highlights how memory empowers subaltern individuals to challenge their erasure, even when systemic forces constrain their resistance. Her maternal memory anchors her determination to survive, shaping her actions as she navigates her oppressive environment. In the face of systemic indifference, such as the restaurant owner's refusal to lend her money after learning of her son's illness "Go now. I've given you a lot of credit already" (Bagul 34) she continues to work, driven by the hope of reuniting with her child. This persistence reflects the resilience memory imparts, transforming her grief into a form of agency. While her body becomes a site of repeated violence and exploitation, her memory of her son allows her to reclaim purpose, propelling her forward despite her despair.

When Girja confronts the man who attempts to rob her, her agency is vividly expressed, fueled by her maternal memory. After enduring physical abuse and humiliation, she finds renewed strength when she realizes the man's duplicity:

Her docile body, racked by terrible pain, came back to life, such was the effect of the rage she felt. Her upper lip peeled back... her eyes filled with the rage of the serpent. (Bagul 42)

This transformation, born of her grief and love for her son, enables her to momentarily disrupt the power dynamic that has rendered her voiceless. Though the confrontation ultimately results in further physical harm, it underscores her refusal to be completely subjugated.

Girja's maternal memory also manifests in her ability to strategize within the limits of her marginalization, as she uses her pain to manipulate perceptions and extract sympathy or monetary advantage. For instance, her claim to a client "I wanted to be a dancer" (Bagul 40) is both a performance and a testament to the dreams crushed by systemic oppression. This manipulation of narrative, rooted in her lived reality and memory, exemplifies the subtle ways in which the subaltern can exercise agency within oppressive structures. In *Streetwalker* reveals how memory, even when steeped in trauma, can empower subaltern subjects to assert agency in constrained and nuanced ways. While her resistance may not dismantle the systems that oppress her, it disrupts the erasure imposed by these systems, asserting her humanity and will to survive. Girja's narrative demonstrates the enduring power of memory as both a burden and a tool for subaltern agency, illustrating how even the most marginalized individuals find ways to reclaim control and resist their circumstances.

Conclusion

Baburao Bagul's *Streetwalker* presents a poignant exploration of trauma and memory within the lived realities of subaltern experience. Girja's narrative through the frameworks of trauma theory and subaltern studies, this research highlights how physical and psychological suffering, and memory intertwine to shape her existence as a marginalized subject. The analysis reveals that Girja's trauma is not solely a product of individual pain but is deeply embedded in the structures of patriarchy, classism, and socio-economic exploitation that perpetuate her marginalization. Girja's body becomes a site of inscribed trauma, bearing the weight of repetitive violence and dehumanization. Her maternal memory emerges as a dual force fueling her suffering and her resilience. While memories of her son serve as a reminder of her loss, they also drive her to endure and fight for agency within her constrained circumstances. Moments of defiance, such as her confrontation with an abusive client or her attempts to assert dignity against systemic erasure, reflect how memory can act as a catalyst for subaltern agency, however limited or fleeting it may be.

The study underscores the complexity of Girja's agency, revealing it to be not only a response to systemic violence but also an act of survival and resistance. Her memories, deeply tied to her maternal identity, disrupt the silences imposed upon her, allowing her to reclaim a sense of purpose and humanity despite the oppressive forces that seek to erase her voice. While Girja's acts of resistance do not dismantle the systems that oppress her, they affirm her resilience and individuality, challenging the invisibility of subaltern suffering. Her experiences through the lens of trauma theory, exemplify the fragmentation and repetition inherent in trauma, where pain is re-lived through the body and mind. Subaltern studies contextualize this pain within a broader framework of systemic violence, emphasizing the role of memory as both a site of suffering and a tool for resistance. Together, these perspectives illuminate the profound intersections of personal and structural trauma in subaltern lives. Bagul presents a narrative that is both harrowing and deeply human, forcing readers to confront the layered realities of trauma and memory in subaltern experience. By situating Girja's story within the larger discourse of trauma and marginalization, the research highlights the importance of acknowledging the silenced voices of subaltern subjects and the enduring power of memory as a means of resistance and survival. This study serves



as a testament to the resilience of marginalized individuals and the complexities of navigating trauma and memory within oppressive systems.

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