

Submission and Resistance in Nimbalkar's poem *Mother*: A Critical Study with CBI Approach

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ABSTRACT

Of all the blessed things god has bestowed on us, motherhood is probably the best gift that human beings are gifted with. There is nothing that could be an exchange for the value of motherhood. It is the highest and noblest feeling that women possess. Her sacrifices often go unattended and unaddressed—irrespective of the fact—if she sacrifices her life. It is even sour and bitter if the mother happens to be a Dalit woman; the discrimination is doubled and the marginalization is doubled—of being a woman and a Dalit. Thus, in the light of the above things, this paper aims at providing a critical study of the poem *Mother* to explore hurdles and difficulties a Dalit women encounter, especially from a Content Based Instruction (CBI) approach.

Keywords: CBI, Suffering, Discrimination, Grief, Nimbalkar

INTRODUCTION

Waman Nimbalkar is a Dalit writer producing literary works in Marathi, a regional language chiefly used in Indian state of Maharashtra. His poem titled *Mother* is very popular and anthologized in Modern Marathi Dalit Literature. The poem is translated into English from its original Marathi version by Priya Adarkar. The poem is written in a simple language without any rhyme scheme. The language used by the poet is lucid and easy to understand. The poet has adhered to the punctuation rules. There are a total of 25 verses in this poem, which is reproduced below from *Poisoned Bread*. Let us analyse the poem in detail and apply Content Based Instruction (CBI) approach. The CBI is “an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.204).

Mother!

Daylight would die. Darkness would reign.
 We at our hut's door. No single light inside.
 Lights burning in houses around.
 Kitchen-fires too. *Bhakris* beaten out.
 Vegetables, gruels cooked.
 In our nostrils, the smell of food. In our stomachs, darkness.
 From our eyes, welling up, streams of tears.
 Slicing darkness, a shadow heavily draws near.
 On her head, a burden. Her legs a-totter.
 Thin, dark of body ... my mother.
 All day she combs the forest for firewood.
 We wait her return.
 When she brings no firewood to sell we go to bed hungry.
 One day something happens. How we don't know.
 Mother comes home leg bandaged, bleeding.
 A large black snake bit her, say two women.
 He raised his hood. He struck her. He slithered away.
 Mother fell to the ground.
 We try charms. We try spells. The medicine man comes.
 The day ends. So does her life.
 We burst into grief. Our grief melts into air.
 Mother is gone. We, her brood, thrown to the winds.
 Even now my eyes search for mother. My sadness grows.
 When I see a thin woman with firewood on her head,
 I go and buy all her firewood.

- **Waman Nimbalkar** (Translated from Marathi into English
 by Priya Adarkar)

Like many Dalit writings, the poem *Mother* too expresses the plight of the Dalit community. This becomes clear in the opening verses itself when Nimbalkar writes phrases like 'Darkness would reign' and 'No single light inside'. We know that writers, from times immemorial, have used 'darkness' as a metaphor for all bad or evil things and 'light' as a metaphor for all good things. Hence, darkness may refer to things such as ignorance oppression, sadness pain, suffering, loss, etc. On the other hand, light may refer to things such as happiness, joy, wisdom, peace, harmony, etc. Therefore, the poet uses 'darkness' to show the pathetic condition of the Dalits in India. For Dalits have been deprived of basic human rights since ages and are treated with cruelty.

In the following verses, Nimbalkar creates a contrast (which is real) between the lives of the Dalit people and that of the upper castes. We are aware of the fact that Dalits have always been subjected to inhuman treatment on the basis of irrational Varna system based on Hindu religion. So, we see that on one side, the poet points at a picture of hungry Dalit children in their dark hut; and on the other side, he portrays the surrounding houses of the upper castes which are illuminated and where the evening meal is being prepared- 'Bhakris beaten out' and 'vegetables, gruels cooked'. Here, we realize that these upper caste neighbours are completely blind to the hopeless state of their Dalit neighbours.

The poet further elaborates on the helplessness of the Dalit children as the smell of food enters their nostrils and their empty stomachs grumble. Hunger is natural to all living creatures. However, for the Dalit community, hunger is a never-ending crisis. Thirst is an integral part of their lives. The caste system has made their lives difficult so much so that even their basic requirements such as food and water are not met properly. They are made to live wretched lives. They are downtrodden and demoralised. They are oppressed by upper-caste people. For Dalits, life is an everyday struggle. The poet subtly captures all these things when he writes that their eyes are filled with tears—"From an eye, welling up, streams of fears".

As the title of the poem suggests, the children are waiting for their mother. The mother has gone out into the forest to collect firewood. Then, she would sell the firewood to make some money and feed her children. We get an idea that this is a daily routine. For the poet says that on days when the mother brings no firewood to sell, "we go to bed hungry." Here, we understand that the mother is the sole breadwinner of the family. The poet describes the mother as "Thin, dark of body." The thin body of the mother represents the lack of food. This is the condition of most of the Dalits. They are treated as slaves by the society. They are made to work for many hours every day and in return, they are not even provided with sufficient food and water.

Then, the poet writes about a particular incident in the second half of the poem. One day, the mother is bitten by a large black snake when she had gone into the forest to bring firewood. Hence, she "Comes home leg bandaged, bleeding." She's accompanied by two women as she's not able to walk properly. The women inform the children about how the snake bit her. "He raised his hood. He stuck her. He slithered away." This incident also highlights the vulnerability of the Dalit community that their lives are insecure. They have no protection whatsoever. They are at a risk not only from animals but also from fellow humans.

Then the tragedy is unfolded in the following lines of the poem. The mother dies as a result of snake bite. Probably, the poison of the snake had spread throughout her body. But it may also be possible that the mother did not receive proper medical help. In a community where Dalits are treated as untouchables, chances are that no or very basic medical aid is provided to such people. And more so in accidents like these, the upper-caste doctors may not be very keen on treating or attending to the wound with his 'sacred hands'. Hence, we find that they had to depend on charms and spells and traditional medicine man, who is generally from the same caste.

"The day ends, so does her life." The mother dies. And it may see clear what caused her death; snake bit. However, there may be other factors that may have contributed to her eventual death. "Thin, of body." We know that many people, especially children, from an underprivileged community such as Dalits, die every year in our country because of malnutrition. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the mother was not very healthy because of the lack of food, let alone nutritious food. And we have already read that they would also go to bed hungry sometimes, as there was nothing to eat. This may point towards the possibility of a weaker immunity in the mother as well as her children. Hence, the mother's weak body was not able to withstand the sting of the snake for long. And this is the situation of the entire community. The weaker sections of the society such as the Dalits are relatively more prone to diseases than others. They are also more likely to suffer from natural calamities. In such a scenario, their lives are extremely vulnerable. In the poem "Mother", we see one such example.

However, the death of the mother is not the end of the tragedy. With the death of the mother, the children "her blood[is]thrown to the winds." Losing one's own parents is a catastrophe for any child. And if the child is a Dalit, then it is a greater catastrophe, of course, the mother was the sole breadwinner of the family. Apart from that, the children are now left without any emotional support; without anyone to care for and look after them, in a society that did not care about them. This situation is skilfully captured by the poet in the phrase "thrown to the winds." Moreover, losing one's mother when being a child is a greater calamity. Time goes by, but the wound never seems to heal; the damage is never repaired. This we find when the poet writes that "Even now my eyes search for mother."

Nevertheless, the poet persona still feels sad when he thinks about his mother. And this has made him more empathetic in nature. Consequently, wherever he sees "a thin woman with firewood on her head," he goes and buys all her firewood. These verses give us an insight into

the thinking of the poet persona. Probably, when he sees such a woman, he is reminded of the struggles of his own mother. He realizes that the woman may have children, who may be waiting for her to return and feed them (just as he used to when he was a child). Hence, as a way to help and to show gratitude and respect to all such mothers, he buys all the firewood. This shows his deep concern for people. And the poem ends on a heart touching note.

The poem *Mother* also illustrates the role of women in society—the struggles they undertake, the sacrifices they make for the families, and so on. In her essay titled “Language and Power in Images of Indian Women,” Janet A Contuse writes “In his poem 'mother' the Dalit poet Waman Nimbalkar refers to his mother in a respectful tone as a hard-working provider for her children.” Therefore, the poem “Mother” portrays the sufferings and pain of a Dalit family in particular, and of the entire Dalit community in general. Waman Nimbalkar tries to represent the lives of the Dalits through the mother and her children. In doing so, he subtly brings out their deprivation and the cruelties they face from society.

This poem has been used to teach English language, employing CBI approach. A detailed plan is presented.

Lesson Plan

Subject:	English Literature
Content Area:	Indian Literature (Dalit Literature)
Lesson:	<i>Mother</i> (Poem) Waman Nimbalkar
Number of Students:	45-50
Age:	21 to 25
Proficiency Level:	Intermediate (Mixed Group)
Length of lesson:	60 minutes
Class duration:	60 min.

1. Content Learning Objectives for the Lesson

By the end of the lesson students:

- a. Engage themselves in a preparatory activity which help in guessing the content words in the poem while reading
- b. Identify and differentiate the working-class women (downtrodden) from the main stream society

- c. Explore themes, common literary devices, and objects in the poem *Mother* in particular

2. Language Learning Objectives for the Lesson

By the end of the lesson students:

- a. Orally describe social setting of the poem (Speaking)
- b. Describe culturally specific words, metaphorical words, and rhyming words (Vocabulary)
- c. Use pun of the words in the poem *Mother* in general (Writing)

3. Vocabulary Students Need to Know

- a. technical terms that are specific to the content area of study (For example, the word “product” is used in general English, but for math, it has a technical meaning that indicates multiplication, as in, “The product of 2 and 8 is 16.”)

Daylight, darkness, reign, hut's door, No-single-light-inside, kitchen-fires, Bhakris, welling up, streams of tears, legs a-totter, thin, dark of body, and combs the forest for firewood.

- b. The students may be challenged on other words:

Brings no firewood to sell; go to bed hungry; leg bandaged, bleeding. black snake bit her; hood, slithered away; try charms; try spells. burst into grief; grief melts into air. Mother is gone.

In this lesson, students could be challenged by new technical vocabulary that are associated with “medicine man”. With reference to the title of the poem ‘Mother’, students could do work in teams to describe their mother respectively. To begin with, a differentiation of working mother and home maker could be shared. The instructor needs to introduce author biography, location of the poem, context of the poem and the poet’s views on the poem. In addition, all the content words and cultural differences could be defined. At end of exercise, the instructor may evaluate their knowledge on literary words and assess their listening, speaking and reading skills through the poem. The students could be asked to write summary of the poem.

An in-depth lesson plan is provided below:

In-depth Lesson Plan				
Time	Lesson Content/ Activity Stages	Language focus (what kind of language/content will the students use/ practice)	Teacher's Role of the (my role, and what I will be paying attention to)	Students' Role (what they will do and how they will interact with each other and the content)
10 minutes	Brainstorming & Elicitation	Defining their mothers in simple language	Uses probing questions, explain and illustrating with examples.	Describe the title of the poem <i>Mother</i> in their own words
10 minutes	Brief bio-note of the author	Reading Comprehension Silent reading	Presents important events, and achievements of the poet.	Follow Wikipedia for more information.
10 minutes	Introduction of the Poem	Listening Comprehension Speaking skills, Literary figures, simile, rhyming words etc.,	Creates awareness about working class women/house maker.	interpret the poem
10 minutes	Introduce and practice content language	Daylight, Darkness, would reign, hut's door. No single light inside. Kitchen-fires. Bhakris, welling up; streams of tears. legs a-totter; Thin, dark of body; combs the forest for firewood.	Elaborates the content, relating the poem in the context of people.	Understand the vocabulary associated with the topic and then students will be quizzed.
10 minutes	Applying new knowledge and language	Using situational grammar brings no firewood to sell; go to bed hungry; leg bandaged, bleeding. black snake bit her; hood, slithered away; try charms; try spells. burst into grief; grief melts into air. Mother is gone.	Looks into the construction of sentences, and categorizing the word families (Content/Language)	Reproduce content words relating them with the situation. Identify, differentiating the working-class women (downtrodden) from the main stream society.
10 minutes	Evaluation	Daylight, Darkness; streams of tears. legs a-totter; Thin, dark of body; combs the forest for firewood. Writing: Using these content words, to develop a summary of the poem	Critiques the themes, objects, and outline the entire poem in the Indian context.	Orally describe social setting of the poem, metaphorical words, and rhyming words (Vocabulary)

				Explore themes of the poem.
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CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that the poem offers a broader perspective of suffering of a woman – Dalits in particular. It can be easily perceived how a woman especially from the Dalit community is treated. The poem *Mother* through its portrayal addresses many issues that we need to address and offer a resolution suitable to all sections of the society. The poem could be used in the English classroom to teach language employing Content Based Instruction (CBI) approach.

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