

Class Consciousness and Class Struggle in Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma*: An Analysis in the Light of Marxist Philosophy and Post-Human Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights a comprehensive analysis of Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma* (1985) employing both Marxist philosophy and post-human pedagogy to explore the novel's portrayal of class struggle and resistance. The study emphasizes the Marxist themes of class conflict and the development of class consciousness by focusing on the Nankar peasants' fight against feudal subjugation. Through this lens, *Batasir Ma* unleashes the ways in which historical material conditions shape the peasants' collective actions and ideological transformation. Additionally, the paper introduces a post-humanist perspective to uplift the analysis to a crucial aspect. Post-human pedagogy challenges anthropocentric ideas of knowledge and agency, suggesting that the struggle portrayed in *Batasir Ma* extends beyond human actors to encompass the broader ecological and relational forces at play. In this framework, the land, nature, and human beings are seen as interconnected agents in the resistance against exploitation. This ecological dimension reframes the narrative, proposing that solidarity is not limited to human beings but includes an awareness of the interdependence of all life forms. The paper argues that Bhattacharya's novel reflects both Marxist materialist principles and anticipates contemporary discussions on the limitations of human-centered thinking in political and social movements. By integrating Marxism with post-humanism, the study uncovers how *Batasir Ma* presents a vision of resistance that challenges traditional concepts of human agency and emphasizes the collective struggle that spans across species and ecological systems. In doing so, the paper highlights the novel's relevance to current debates about justice, environmentalism, and solidarity in the face of global challenges. Ultimately, this analysis positions *Batasir Ma* as a forward-thinking text that not only critiques historical systems of oppression but also offers a model of resistance that is inclusive, ecological, and interconnected. The novel, through its exploration of class struggle and ecological solidarity, speaks to ongoing conversations about collective action, the limits of anthropocentrism, and the need for a more holistic approach to justice.

Introduction

Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma* stands as a poignant narrative that delves into the harsh realities of socio-economic oppression endured by Nankar peasants under both feudal and colonial regimes. The novel is deeply rooted in the historical context of the Nankar Rebellion, a significant uprising against exploitative landholding practices and colonial authority. Bhattacharya's portrayal of the peasants' plight is not only an exploration of their suffering but also an account of their evolving consciousness—an awakening to the systemic forces that perpetuate their oppression. The narrative unfolds the gradual formation of collective awareness among the peasants, leading to a bold and unified resistance against their exploiters. This depiction of class struggle is a central theme of the novel, illustrating the tension between the oppressed and the forces of power.

In traditional readings of *Batasir Ma*, much of the analysis of class struggle has centered on the role of human agency, focusing on individual actors and their ability to challenge oppressive systems. These interpretations often emphasize the material conditions and ideological shifts that lead to a collective realization of class consciousness. However, contemporary developments in theoretical thought, particularly post-human pedagogy, offer an opportunity to reframe this narrative in a broader, more nuanced context. Post-human pedagogy, with its rejection of human-centered frameworks, suggests that resistance is not solely a product of human agency but can also emerge from an interconnected web of relationships that includes the environment, non-human entities, and the forces of nature.

This paper seeks to expand upon the existing discourse by offering an integrated analysis of *Batasir Ma* through the dual lenses of Marxist philosophy and post-humanist thought. Marxist theory, with its emphasis on class struggle, historical materialism, and the dynamics of power, provides a foundational understanding of the economic and social forces at play in the novel. At the same time, post-humanist thought allows for an exploration of the ecological and relational dimensions of resistance, challenging the anthropocentric focus that has traditionally defined readings of class struggle. By synthesizing these two theoretical perspectives, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive reading of Bhattacharya's work that recognizes the complexity of resistance as a collective, multifaceted process.

Incorporating Marxism and post-humanism into the analysis of *Batasir Ma* reveals the novel's profound engagement with contemporary debates about agency, solidarity, and ecological interconnectedness. The Nankar peasants' rebellion, when viewed through these combined lenses, becomes not just a human struggle for justice but also a part of a broader ecological and relational resistance that transcends traditional boundaries. Through this integrated approach, the paper aims to demonstrate that Bhattacharya's novel is not only a critical historical document but also a text that speaks to current global concerns about environmental justice, collective action, and the reimagining of human relationships with the non-human world.

Literature Review

The relationship between literature and socio-economic structures has long been a central concern in Marxist criticism. Foundational texts such as *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848) assert that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Literature, from this perspective, does not merely reflect reality but actively participates in the ideological production and contestation of class relations. Terry Eagleton (1976) further develops this approach by arguing that literary forms are historically situated and ideologically charged, often revealing the contradictions embedded within capitalist societies. Within this framework, class struggle is not only represented but also interrogated as a dynamic force driving historical transformation.

Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma* engages deeply with these classical Marxist themes, particularly through its depiction of the Nankar system, a form of bonded agrarian labor marked by extreme exploitation and social marginalization. The novel's portrayal of the Nankar peasants' suffering and eventual resistance mirrors the Marxist theory of surplus value extraction and alienation—where peasants are estranged both from the fruits of their labor and from their own humanity. In this context, Bhattacharya contributes to a long-standing Bengali literary tradition that foregrounds peasant revolts as sites of political awakening. Authors such as Mahasweta Devi, in works like *Hajar Churashir Maa* and *Rudali*, have similarly emphasized the collective agency of subaltern communities, often focusing on tribal and agrarian uprisings. These narratives position peasant consciousness not as passive or residual, but as a generative force capable of revolutionary rupture.

Partha Chatterjee (1984) adds another layer to this discussion by highlighting the intersection of class, culture, and identity in postcolonial contexts. For Chatterjee, cultural production—including literature—becomes a battleground where nationalist, class-based, and subaltern ideologies contend. Bhattacharya's focus on communal memory, oral storytelling, and village solidarity resonates with this argument, portraying how cultural practices become vehicles for political resistance. The novel's attention to collective memory—rituals, songs, local lore—helps preserve a counter-narrative to dominant historical discourse, situating *Batasir Ma* within a broader tradition of subaltern historiography.

However, Bhattacharya's narrative also signals a departure from traditional Marxist humanism by implicating non-human forces—such as the landscape, seasons, animals, and weather patterns—as integral to the unfolding of social struggle. This aligns with the concerns of post-humanist thinkers like Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Maurits S. Pedersen (2010), who advocate for a decentering of the autonomous human subject. Post-humanism challenges the anthropocentric biases of Enlightenment humanism and instead emphasizes relational ontologies, where agency is distributed across human and non-human actors. In *Batasir Ma*, nature is not merely a backdrop to human events but a co-actor: floods, droughts, and even the sounds of the forest shape characters' movements, choices, and vulnerabilities. This suggests a post-human ecology of resistance, where survival and rebellion emerge from an entangled mesh of human labor and environmental conditions.

Despite a rich body of Marxist literary criticism on Bengali peasant narratives, including the Naxalite and Nankar movements, there remains a critical gap in studies that bring Marxist and post-humanist frameworks into dialogue. Most analyses treat these paradigms as mutually exclusive—one focused on socio-economic structures, the other on epistemic and ontological decentralization. Yet, *Batasir Ma* invites precisely such a convergence. By acknowledging both the materialist dynamics of class oppression and the ecological interdependencies that shape rural life, the novel opens up a new avenue for understanding resistance in non-anthropocentric terms.

This paper, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by employing a dual-framework analysis of *Batasir Ma*, combining classical Marxist critique with post-humanist theory. It argues that such an integrated approach reveals a more nuanced understanding of agency, resistance, and historical consciousness in the novel—where the struggle is not only between humans and exploiters but also between communities and their natural world, interlinked through systems of survival, memory, and revolt.

Research Methodology

This study incorporates a qualitative research approach to analyze Ajay Bhattacharya's novel *Batasir Ma* through the lens of Marxist literary criticism and post-human pedagogy. With an amalgamation of both textual analysis with theoretical frameworks, this research aims to examine how the novel depicts class struggle, class consciousness, and evolving socio-political conditions in a post-humanist landscape. The methodology is structured as follows:

Research Approach

- This study is primarily interpretive and analytical, focusing on the thematic, structural, and ideological aspects of *Batasir Ma*.
- A Marxist critical approach is used to discover class relations, economic exploitation, and the hurdles of the working class as represented in the novel.
- Post-human pedagogy illustrates an additional lens to assess the role of education, technology, and ecological interactions in shaping the consciousness of oppressed communities.

Data Collection

- The primary data source is the novel *Batasir Ma* by Ajay Bhattacharya.
- Secondary data includes critical essays, journal articles, and books on Marxist criticism, post-humanism, and South Asian literary studies.
- Relevant historical and socio-political documents related to labor movements and economic transformations in colonial and postcolonial South Asia are regarded to contextualize the analysis.

Textual Analysis

- A close reading of *Batasir Ma* is conducted to detect the key passages that depict class struggle, worker exploitation, resistance, and the transformation of social consciousness.
- Thematic analysis is applied to inspect recurring motifs of suppression, solidarity, alienation, and revolution.
- Character analysis is used to trace the development of class consciousness among different social groups in the novel.

Theoretical Framework

- Marxist Theory: The research draws from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' theories on class struggle, base-superstructure relationships, and ideology.
- Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony: The study examines how cultural and ideological dominance influences the working class's perception of their oppression.
- Post-Human Pedagogy: The role of education, labor in a technologically evolving world, and ecological concerns in class struggle are examined through post-humanist perspectives.

Comparative and Contextual Analysis

- The research compares *Batasir Ma* with other South Asian literary works dealing with class consciousness and labor movements.
- The historical and economic conditions that shaped the narrative of the novel are analyzed to provide a broader socio-political context.

Limitations of the Study

- The research is limited to literary and theoretical analysis and does not include empirical or fieldwork-based data.
- The study focuses on textual interpretation rather than direct testimonies from working-class communities.
- The integration of post-human pedagogy with Marxist criticism is a relatively new approach, which may present challenges in fully aligning both perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

- The study acknowledges and credits all sources used in the analysis.
- It ensures that interpretations remain faithful to the text while considering multiple scholarly perspectives.

This methodological framework allows for a nuanced and interdisciplinary examination of *Batasir Ma*, revealing how literature serves as a critical space for discussing class struggles and evolving social realities.

Text Analysis: Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma*: A Glimpse into Feudal Exploitation and Resistance

Ajay Bhattacharya was a prominent figure in the socio-political and literary movements of the Indian subcontinent. He envisioned a new social order for the working class by challenging feudalism and class exploitation and dedicated his entire life to realizing that dream.

As one of the key leaders of the historic *Nankar Rebellion* (1947–1948) in the Sylhet region, his role was of great significance. He not only led the movement but also documented its history in an authoritative and detailed account. Although born into a feudal family, he devoted his life to fighting for the rights of workers, peasants, and the oppressed.

Alongside his political activism, he used literature as a powerful medium to weave the dream of social transformation. His creative brilliance was most evident in his novels and short stories. During the Pakistan era, he spent a long 20 years (1947–1967) in prison, and it was during this time that he delved deeply into literary pursuits, expressing his life experiences and ideals through the written word.

In the novel *Batasir Ma*, he vividly portrays the cruelty of imperialism and feudalism, the harsh realities of exploitation, and the suffering of the oppressed in a realistic and grounded language. However, his literature does not merely depict sorrow and pain—it also embodies hope, resistance, and the struggle for justice and rights against oppression.

His stories and novels bring forth not only the harsh realities of the marginalized and neglected classes but also the unyielding spirit of breaking free from those conditions. Thus, Ajay Bhattacharya's literature is not just artistic expression—it is a powerful narrative of political and moral responsibility that echoes through the intersection of history and reality.

Ajay Bhattacharya's acclaimed novel *Batasir Ma* is set against a distinct socio-political backdrop. The novel illuminates the lives of marginalized and land-dependent rural peasants, mirroring the agonies and unyielding experiences of communities akin to the *Nankar* tenants. Through their

struggles, Bhattacharya evokes a new spirit of resistance. The novel vividly portrays the socio-economic landscape and the feudal structure of British colonial Sylhet, presented through the microcosm of the village of Basantapur. Though the village is named Basantapur, its precise geographical identity remains ambiguous. The narrative reveals that Basantapur is part of a "Moshuri Taluk" established under British imperial administration, with the "Boro-Bari" (the Master house of the feudal landlord) acting as the nucleus around which village life revolves.

The life and gaze of the novel's central character—*Batasir Ma*—are involuntarily fixated on the Boro-Bari. The entire village exists under the will of the feudal household; every rise and fall in the villagers' lives is dictated by its authority. They are imprisoned within the socio-economic orbit of the feudal estate. Ajay Bhattacharya poignantly describes this captivity:

"There is no way out. They live on the land owned by the Boro-Bari, they cultivate the fields of the Boro-Bari, and for their entire lives, and they must cook their meals over the hearths belonging to the Boro-Bari. Thus, the path out is blocked. So they circle—revolving around the Boro-Bari for their entire lives. They run whenever the Boro-Bari calls—they must always rush when summoned." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 10)

Bhattacharya captures the life of the lower classes in this novel with a realistic and empathetic lens. The narrative centers on *Batasir Ma*, a native of Basantapur village. As a youth, she and Dulal were close village companions—encountering one another on paths and byways, with *Batasir Ma* often requesting Dulal to sing for her. Her grandmother would joke about their relationship and even expressed a desire to see them married. However, in the feudal constraints of Basantapur, such a union was far from simple.

To navigate the complications of marriage, Dulal's uncle Bipul and *Batasir Ma*'s father Kunj left the decision to the couple themselves. Eventually, after much negotiation and movement, they were married. Post-marriage, Dulal, deeply affectionate towards *Batasir Ma*, endeavored to protect her dignity and elevate her to a respectable position. He refused to allow her to work as a bonded laborer at the Boro-Bari, which was a customary expectation for wives in Basantapur.

This defiance was not tolerated by the feudal authorities. Bhattacharya uses *Batasir Ma* to unmask the grotesque faces of feudal oppression. The zamindars (landlords) in the story—represented by the elder, middle, and younger "babus" of the Boro-Bari—never acknowledged the dignity or humanity of their peasant tenants. Women of servant backgrounds, especially female attendants or *badis*, were frequently subjected to sexual exploitation and denied the right to form legitimate families. Their marriages were mere formalities, and they were never truly accepted in their husbands' homes.

In the novel, one of the younger landlords exploits a domestic worker named Rangamoti. Dulal, with a strong moral compass, rescues Rangamoti and sends her to the city to free her from such a life—an act reflecting his deep humanity. The following dialogue between Dulal and *Batasir Ma* reflects the grim reality of these women:

"Do the maids from Boro-Bari never get married?"

"They do, they do—a lot. But those are maid-marriages."

"A maid remains a maid, and the marriage exists only in name."

"Yes, I know. To marry a maid, it has to be a maid-marriage."

"But I didn't want that."

"Then what did you want?"

"I wanted to get her out of Boro-Bari. But Chhoto Babu wouldn't allow it. He refused to give up Rangamoti." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 27)

The feudal lords considered such exploitation a routine part of their daily lives. Dulal's opposition to this vile system made him a target of hostility from the feudal rulers.

The zamindar class exploited every aspect of the villagers' lives in Basantapur. The peasants were treated like subservient slaves who lived and worked solely under the orders of the feudal lords. Yet, some among them dared to resist. Dulal became a vocal opponent of these injustices. A significant social tradition in the village was fishing in the Panchayeti Bill on the eve of *Poush*

Sankranti, where a portion of the catch was always given to the Boro-Bari as tribute. Living in the landlord's estate, peasants had no choice but to comply with such customs.

The burden of taxes and ritual tributes, like *salami*, was an accepted part of feudal life. Speaking out against the zamindars was as dangerous as challenging a crocodile while standing in water. *Batasir Ma* grew increasingly fearful as Dulal became more confrontational toward the landlords, urging him to act with caution—but Dulal refused to listen. At one point, he was even physically assaulted by the head landlord for his defiance. The relationship between the landlords and peasants in *Batasir Ma* is fraught with conflict. The landlords stripped the peasants of everything through exploitation, while the peasants grew increasingly resentful. To punish disobedient peasants, the landlords confiscated land and evicted them from their homesteads. This brutal form of feudal exploitation is seen through the dispossession and eviction of characters like Jabbar, Rasik, Murshed, and Ramen by the *Baro Bari* (Master house). Yet, from within this society emerged the so-called "rotten pests," who later transformed into a new revolutionary force. These laborers, oppressed and destitute representatives of the working class, immigrated to Assam in hopes of a better life. Notably, the forced migration of oppressed *Nankar* peasants was a reality in the Sylhet region up until the post-World War I period. Dulal, too, tried to escape the tyranny of the landlords by going to Assam, leaving behind *Batasir Ma* to assess the situation, but he returned with a severe wound on his foot, which eventually led to his death.

Batasir Ma is a novel rooted in the rural life under feudal oppression. Although the novel primarily presents the tyranny of the feudal lords, it also contains elements of humanity. In the novel, Bankim Babu represents a conscientious human being. As a village doctor, he treated the people of Basantapur, often without taking any payment. He sincerely cared for the well-being of the poor villagers and frequently sacrificed his personal interests to help them. Regarding his humanitarian nature, the novelist writes:

"And when it came to people like *Batasir Ma*, he never hesitated to spend his own money to help such helpless human beings battling with death." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 55)

Doctor Bankim Babu felt deep sorrow witnessing the landlords' cruelty, but he could do nothing to stop it.

The resentment felt by the elder mistress upon seeing *Batasir Ma* is presented by the author through an omniscient viewpoint in the following way:

"The mistresses were enraged by *Batasir Ma*'s chastity. What chastity could a bonded woman possibly have? Ever since Dulal refused to let his wife work at the *Baro Bari*, staining the character of the masters, the women of the *Baro Bari* considered *Batasir Ma* their rival. They, the eternal rulers of the village, the sole proprietors of chastity, how could they tolerate someone else claiming it? To them, this was nothing short of humiliation. This was their grudge. The elder mistress expressed this resentment in her first words." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 51)

In the feudal society, the lower classes held no value in the eyes of the feudal lords, who were solely absorbed in their own luxury. Any disruption to their lavish lifestyle disturbed them deeply. Hence, in the face of extreme poverty, inhuman exploitation, relentless labor, and lack of proper medical care, young girls like Batasi died untimely deaths. Even though Batasi's death devastated her widowed mother, necessity forced her to return to work just days later. Neither Dulal's death nor Batasi's moved the hearts of the mistresses of the *Baro Bari*, who remained immersed in their comfort and luxury. So, *Batasir Ma* eventually went back seeking work, they refused to pay her, offering only food in exchange for labor. The mistresses of the *Baro Bari* are portrayed as typical representatives of their class in the novel.

When villagers urged them to employ *Batasir Ma*, the mistresses said:

Elder Mistress: "I already have a worker. But if she's willing to work just for food, I might think about it."

Middle Mistress: "Why so many workers every day? But yes, if there's extra work on any day, we might consider *Batasir Ma*. But it'll be just food."

Youngest Mistress: "She's not reliable at all. She skips work at the slightest excuse. Better she looks elsewhere for work." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p. 77–78)

The tenants of Basantapur, especially the bonded laborers and *nankars*, always remain alert at the call or command of the Master house. They have no power to refuse any order from the landlord. Ajay Bhattacharya has portrayed this feudal reality in his novel *Batasir Ma*. The lords and ladies of the Master house use these bonded laborers for various tasks. In the novel, the people of the Master house are depicted as wielding immense power. Their intoxication with power is so pervasive that it influences even their guards, footmen, and servants, who also consider themselves powerful. These aides do not hesitate to strike the bonded tenants on behalf of their masters. If any laborer disobeys, they are forcibly dragged to the Master house. The lady of the house threatens to evict bonded women from their homes.

For protesting against the injustices of the landlord's house, bonded laborers like Ramen, Jabbar, Rasik, and Murshed are forced to leave their homes and migrate to Assam. Women like the mistress of the Master house do not trust the bonded women. So, when a worker from the house finishes grinding spices, the bonded women are body-searched. The servant Jhotka touches the young girl Puti under the pretense of inspecting the folds of her clothes to satisfy his lust. In the novelist's words:

"He took his hand off Puti's cheek. 'Let me see the fold of your clothes,' he said, and while pretending to inspect her clothing, he loosened the edge of her sari and grabbed her slightly developed breast with both hands." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 123)

Even the minor financial progress of the rural middle class provokes envy in the ladies of the Master house, although these middle-class families are still far behind them socio-economically. Nonetheless, these middle-class individuals constantly engage in a psychological rivalry with the Master house. The middle class takes pride in working in British establishments and being part of English-language and cultural environments. However, the rural landlords look down upon these jobs, describing them as equivalent to guarding British masters' dogs or serving their memsahibs. Proud rural mothers arrange religious rituals for sons employed in British institutions and express subtle pride in their sons' employment.

The bonded laborers, however, do not engage in rituals or worship. Instead, they try to please minor masters and cannot distinguish between a foreign or native employer. The rural middle class holds a hostile attitude toward petty landlords and wishes for their downfall. Although different from the landlord class, the middle class shares the same contempt for the laborer class. They do not give the bonded tenants any dignity and maintain a social distance. When *Batasir Ma* starts working at Jagat Babu's house, his wife makes derogatory comments about the Master house, and their neighbor Saudamini Thakurun also joins in.

Ajay Bhattacharya portrays a society where not only feudal lords and elites but even the middle class address working-class bonded laborers with condescension, using terms like "tui" (you, in a derogatory tone). Such contemptuous address is a core aspect of feudal culture. The touch of these "untouchable" laborers is believed to pollute objects like the metal water pots of the Master house or Jagat Babu's hookah water. Saudamini Thakurun discards her water pot midway if even a shadow of a lower caste person falls on her path while going to the river. *Batasir Ma* wonders, what is the difference between the big and semi-big folks? They are two sides of the same coin. (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 112)

The bonded laborers are from the lower rungs of both Hindu and Muslim communities. Their professions dictate their low social status. Therefore, food is served to them with distance. Even the middle class is not free from this obsession with maintaining caste purity. Their aspiration is to regain lost estates and become petty landlords. Due to improved financial status, middle-class families, like Subhash's mother, seek English-educated brides for sons working in British offices. In this society, even a few hundred rupees can recover a foreclosed estate.

The mentality of the middle class portrayed in *Batasir Ma* reflects another form of the petty landlord class—they too exploit the laboring class. For example, Jagat Babu's wife gives leftover food to *Batasir Ma* to flaunt her superior status, saying, "Come take it, *Batasir Ma*. Such rice and curries are wasted in my house every day—you come and take it." The middle-class behavior

toward the poor is no less disrespectful than that of the landed elites. Ajay Bhattacharya, a class-conscious writer, shows that the middle class only shows pity—never love—for the laboring poor.

The society depicted in *Batasir Ma* reflects the economic affluence of the early 20th-century salaried middle class in British-ruled India. It was a time when just three hundred rupees could buy high social status. As a politician and novelist, Ajay Bhattacharya was fully aware of the global depression and the imperialist capitalist crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. He understood how this crisis led to the outbreak of the Second World War and how its socio-economic impact hit India hard.

The novel also illustrates the frequent rural quarrels over trivial matters. In *Batasir Ma*, people fight over chickens, or neighboring groups argue over games. These disputes can lead to the collapse of one village market and the rise of another. For example, Biras, *Batasir Ma*'s son, gets into a conflict with Buchi's mother over ducklings, leading to vulgar verbal fights. The villagers seem to enjoy these conflicts, although some people try to keep the peace and prevent escalation.

Despite frequent quarrels, the bonded laborers cannot rise against feudal lust and exploitation. Even the footmen and servants, empowered by the landlord, indulge in sexual exploitation. In the novel, the younger landlord is the main symbol of lust, aided by his servant Jhotka.

Jhotka knows whom to lust after and whom to offer to his masters. If the younger landlord is interested in a woman, Jhotka suppresses his own desires. That's why he initially does not inform the younger landlord about the beautiful adolescent girl Puti. The feudal lords desire to turn every young, attractive woman into an object of consumption. That's why we see that the young master's attention eventually shifts from former beauties to Puti. Jhotka is sent to summon Puti's father to fulfill the young master's desire. However, corrupt figures like Jhotka fear women like *Batasir Ma*, who are bold and rebellious. Outwardly, even feudal lords treat their wives with respect to maintain domestic peace.

Eventually, a wind of change begins to blow in the centuries-old feudal society of Basantapur. Bonded laborers begin to change in attitude and behavior due to the constant oppression. They can no longer bear the burden of exploitation and humiliation. External influences, especially the example of rebellious and displaced individuals like Dulal, Raman, Rasik, Rafiq, and Jabbar, begin to inspire transformation in the hearts of Basantapur's people. The immovable structure of feudal oppression begins to crack. A new social force begins to rise, creating visible conflict between two opposing powers in society.

In this process, the assaulted adolescent Puti throws a broom at Jhotka—a symbolic act of resistance. The broom becomes a token of scorn thrown at the feudal oppressors. The Master house understands the significance of this act. The novelist portrays this awakening among the proletariat of Basantapur with a metaphor from nature:

“Unnoticed by all, the wind begins to change in Basantapur. Though it doesn't arrive with the sound of drums, winter's chill recedes, and with the breeze of spring, even the tender buds of Basantapur begin to stir—it can no longer remain hidden.” (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 139)

The blow delivered by Puti using a whip strikes at the feudal pride of the landlords of the Master house. They find no fault in what the whip has done. Enraged by their eternal arrogance, they order that Bhangu be brought in by the ear, Bhangu's wife be strangled, and Bhangu's daughter be kidnapped. The younger master even tells the whip-bearer to set fire to Bhangu's house. But the bonded laborers can no longer obey the orders of the masters as before—they scatter in all directions, each seeking something new. The villagers no longer wish to uphold the ideals of the Master house. However, in front of the landlords, they are unable to speak out. Thus, people like Ramkrishna continue to carry loads on their heads at the master's command. Expressing his frustration to his wife after fulfilling the master's order, Ramkrishna says, “If we can't get rid of these vultures, they'll turn the entire village into a garbage dump.” This is how the oppressed bonded peasants of Nankar gradually swell with rage against the feudal zamindari oppression, nurturing a sense of rights and dignity within themselves.

The feudal lords, for their own interests, maintain and shelter loyal thieves and dacoits. When public anger against these criminals becomes too strong, they are hidden away in temples. The

landlords cloak themselves in religion to preserve their dominance in the eyes of the Nankar laborers. The poor peasants, fed up with constant theft, eventually become outraged. But when a thief is caught, the power of justice lies with the zamindar. Therefore, the feudal landlord becomes the judge and jury in the village. The master of the master house gives rulings as he pleases. Regarding this justice system, Ajay Bhattacharya writes:

“The master of the master house will rule—he is the owner of this village. The laws, the court, the high court, the Supreme Court—all are tied to his fingers. No one can override him in this village’s matters. This has always been the tradition here.” (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 150)

This small feudal landlord class saw themselves as representatives of British rule and took pride in presenting themselves as such. So when the laborers expressed anger over the trial of the thief Charan, the landlord proclaimed, “We live on lands granted by the king. How can I then change the laws given by the king? Bring Charan in at once.” When a poor thief is caught, he is fined. Although physical torture may be bearable, the fine feels unbearable. Charan's wife sells her nose ring to pay the fine. However, the money doesn't go to the victim—it ends up in the zamindar's pocket. In old age, these thieves often become temple servants under the patronage of the zamindar. The landlord uses the thieves' money to organize grand religious festivals, and the thieves are then seen as saints.

Over time, the master house begins to decay. In a society where child marriage is common, relatives of *Batasir Ma* insist on marrying the young boy Biru. But *Batasir Ma*, lost in other thoughts, takes no initiative to arrange her son's marriage. Villagers believe that the month of Chaitra is inauspicious, and thus avoid weddings during this time. In the month of Baisakh, the laborers head to the fields to plant rice. In hope of a handful of rice, they take their emaciated cattle and work on the small patches of land they receive in exchange for their labor. If nature is kind—no floods or droughts—then the crops are good, and they're spared from starvation for a while. Yet, with little land and constant zamindari exploitation, their path to survival remains narrow. They continue seeking ways to live, combining their efforts in the struggle to survive.

Even when they are unwilling, the bonded laborers must engage in feuds with other landlords at the order of their own zamindar—fights in which they have no personal stake. The only outcome for them is blood and death. When injured, they're treated by village healers summoned by the zamindar. *Batasir Ma* learns of her son Biru's death. The zamindars don't obstruct her from seeing the body. On seeing her son's dead face, she collapses unconscious. She loses her only son to a conspiracy of the Master house. Ajay Bhattacharya presents this ugly face of feudal oppression and exploitation in the novel as follows:

“The water's noise quieted. With blood repaid by blood, the victory garland soaked in blood was hung around the neck of the Master house, and everyone returned to their homes. Only *Batasir Ma* did not return. Biru, her son, could not return.” (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 184)

Biru's death creates a unique opportunity for the feudal lords of the Master house. They make full use of the incident to attack the rival zamindars of the Sarkar House. Biru's corpse becomes a symbol of victory to them, and the master sets off for the district town with the body. Meanwhile, *Batasir Ma* disappears from public view. The feud between the two feudal powers—the Master house and the Sarkar House—shifts from the vision of the laborers of Basantapur to the town beyond.

After Biru's death, *Batasir Ma*'s disappearance seems to breathe new life into the feudal society of Basantapur. But one evening, she returns to her homestead and sets fire to the Master house in the dark of night, attempting to manifest the flames of class hatred she had harbored in her heart. Though the fire doesn't destroy the Master house, it consumes their cowshed. *Batasir Ma* herself burns in the fire and is reduced to ashes. In Hindu households, the burning death of a cow is considered a terrible omen. Enraged by the event, the master of the Master house threatens to burn down the entire village. Through the death of *Batasir Ma*, the bonded peasants of Basantapur realize their helplessness. But this also propels them into a fierce conflict—a mortal

clash against the feudal zamindars. In the final chapter of *Batasir Ma*, the continuous class struggle between the proletariat and the feudal class takes real shape.

The novel *Batasir Ma* is centered on the lives and struggles of bonded laborers like the Nankars. Though it is not a political novel in the traditional sense—there is no party-centric activism—it resonates with the Marxist view that politics is the struggle for power in the interests of a particular class. From that perspective, we see how *Batasir Ma* attempts to mobilize the impoverished laborers of her class against the oppressive feudal zamindars of the Master house. The organized attempt to break the chains of bonded labor in the novel can thus be seen as political action. Like the Santhal rebellion, the Fakir uprising, or the Garo revolt, the Nankar rebellion, too, was a bloody fight for liberation from exploitation. In that sense, *Batasir Ma* by Ajay Bhattacharya is a novel rooted in the political struggle for liberation from oppression and class conflict.

Although not driven by any organized ideology or party doctrine, it can still be said that *Batasir Ma* represents class struggle politics in a realistic manner. *Batasir Ma* attempts to turn Dulal's personal rebellion into a collective uprising. When young Puti is assaulted by the whip on the command of the senior mistress, she tells the other female laborers, "Come, Puti, we won't stay another moment in this jungle of beasts—every one of them here is a beast." Defiantly, she disobeys the mistress's orders and leaves the Master house. *Batasir Ma*'s rebellious spirit spreads to other humiliated laborers. Thus, the laborer woman Jamuna declares:

"There is no justice, no decency, everything runs by brute force—that day is gone. Basantapur is no longer the same Basantapur." Others angrily say: "If we keep sitting idle like this, it won't work—we have to act now." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 135)

In the wake of the political upheavals of the second decade of the twentieth century, Indian political realities began to shift. The proletariat hoped that these political changes would end feudal rule and bring liberation. The tune of freedom from exploitation grew louder. *Batasir Ma* and the people of Basantapur hoped for a new dawn. In her imagination, *Batasir Ma* harbors intense hatred and vengeance against the feudal class—similar to the class hatred seen among Naxalite communist activists. Ajay Bhattacharya, notably, was a central leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist), known for its Naxalite approach under the leadership of Comrade Charu Majumdar.

Perhaps that is why, in the imagination of *Batasir Ma*, we find scenes where she, along with Puti, Rongmoti, and other women, kills the masters and mistresses of the Master house. In reality, these scenes represent the language of revenge dreamt by the author himself. So when people talk to her about her son's marriage, her mind is elsewhere. Having lost everything while trying to compromise with the Master house, her mind is consumed with thoughts of revenge. In her imagination, she strangles every master and mistress of the Master house. The novelist expresses her state of mind in this way:

"As days pass and she grows older, she becomes more reckless. Her chariot of thoughts runs wildly. Her boat of thought sails through water, land, and sky—she calculates neither barriers nor resistance. Following the path of imagination, she goes to the Master house and strangles the masters and mistresses one by one." (Bhattacharya, 1985, p 158)

In his novel *Batasir Ma*, Ajay Bhattacharya has transformed his real-life experiences into literary expression. As he was deeply committed to Marxist politics, the theme of liberation from exploitation recurs frequently in his writings. He wielded his pen against the agents of the British imperialist ruling class. Therefore, in *Batasir Ma*, he portrays the rule, exploitation, and oppression carried out by feudal oppressors and depicts their eventual defeat at the hands of the proletariat. The story is not presented from the perspective of the petty bourgeoisie or middle class, but rather from the viewpoint of the proletarian class. The revolutionary consciousness of the people is celebrated throughout the novel. The various class-based social, political, and economic relationships in the feudal society inhabited by the bonded Nankars are vividly narrated in *Batasir Ma*. *Batasir Ma* ultimately suggests a vision of solidarity that transcends individual heroism. Collective memory, intergenerational bonds, and ecological interconnectedness underpin the peasants' struggle, offering a model of resistance that is both historically materialist and post-humanist.

Conclusion

Ajay Bhattacharya's *Batasir Ma* stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Marxist ideas about class struggle while also anticipating contemporary post-humanist critiques of human-centered agency. By applying an integrated theoretical framework, this study reveals the novel's complex portrayal of resistance as both a socio-economic and ecological phenomenon. The peasants' fight for dignity and freedom emerges not just from human will but from a profound relational entanglement with their land, history, and collective life.

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