



Original Article

Mapping Social Realism through Marginalized Characters in *Dahanu Road* by
Anosh Irani

Mr. Ramakant Dinkar Patil¹ & Dr. Prashant Pundlik Lohar²

¹Research Student, Department of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur

²Associate Professor and Head of Department of English,
Lal Bahadur Shastri College, Satara

Manuscript ID:
IJAAR-140118

ISSN: 2347-7075
Impact Factor – 8.26

Volume – 14
Issue – 1
September- October 2026
Pp. 142 - 151

Submitted: 11 Sept 2026
Revised: 26 Sept 2026
Accepted: 30 Sept 2026
Published: 10 Oct 2026

Corresponding Author:
Mr. Ramakant Dinkar Patil

Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://ijaar.co.in/>



DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.23361588

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23361588>



Creative Commons



Abstract:

*This paper explores the representation of social realism in *Dahanu Road* by Anosh Irani, focusing on marginalized communities—particularly the Warli tribals—and their interaction with the economically dominant Irani (Parsi) class. Through characters such as Ganpat and Kusum, the novel foregrounds systemic inequality, exploitation, and inherited trauma. The study employs a socio-realist and subaltern framework to argue that Irani constructs a layered narrative where class, caste-like hierarchies, and historical oppression converge. The text reveals how marginal lives are shaped by poverty, violence, and invisibility within postcolonial India.*

Keywords: Social Realism, Marginalized, Subaltern.

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), which permits others to remix, adapt, and build upon the work non-commercially, provided that appropriate credit is given and that any new creations are licensed under identical terms.

How to cite this article:

Mr. Ramakant Dinkar Patil & Dr. Prashant Pundlik Lohar (2026). Mapping Social Realism through Marginalized Characters in *Dahanu Road* by Anosh Irani. *International Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 14(1), 142–151. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23361588>



Introduction:

Social realism as a literary mode seeks to depict the lived experiences of ordinary people within specific socio-economic conditions. In *Dahanu Road*, Anosh Irani situates his narrative in a semi-rural coastal town where multiple communities coexist unequally. The novel exposes the fractures between landowning elites and tribal laborers, thereby mapping a deeply stratified society.

The Warli community emerges as a central focus, not merely as background figures but as embodiments of historical dispossession. Through their stories, Irani critiques the persistence of feudal structures within modern India.

Social Realism and the Indian Context:

Social realism in the Indian literary tradition has consistently functioned as a medium to interrogate entrenched hierarchies of class, caste, and economic power. In *Dahanu Road*, Anosh Irani extends this tradition by situating his narrative within a semi-urban, coastal landscape that reflects both continuity and transition in postcolonial India. Unlike metropolitan narratives that often foreground mobility and aspiration, *Dahanu Road* presents a space where historical inequities remain deeply embedded in everyday life.

Irani's realism is marked by an unembellished depiction of social stagnation. The town of Dahanu is not merely a backdrop but an active social organism shaped by economic disparity and cultural fragmentation. The text portrays a world in which different communities coexist yet remain sharply divided along lines of power. The Iranis, as landowners, occupy positions of relative stability and authority, while the Warli tribals exist in

precarious conditions defined by labor, poverty, and invisibility.

A key feature of social realism in the Indian context is its attention to the ordinary, often overlooked details of life. Irani captures this through vivid descriptions of routine suffering and normalized despair. The narrative observes how “tribal fishermen drowned in the sea... retired schoolteachers drank country liquor... and young women... became balloons themselves, puffed up... with disappointment”. Such imagery does not dramatize tragedy but instead presents it as an everyday reality, thereby reinforcing the pervasive nature of hardship.

Moreover, the novel reflects the persistence of quasi-feudal structures within a modernizing nation. Despite the temporal setting in contemporary India, relationships between landowners and laborers echo older systems of dependency and control. Economic mobility appears limited, and social roles remain largely predetermined. This continuity underscores a central concern of Indian social realism: the failure of independence and modernization to dismantle structural inequalities.

Irani also incorporates linguistic diversity as a marker of social realism. The coexistence of Hindi, Gujarati, Dari, and local dialects mirrors India's multilingual fabric, while simultaneously highlighting divisions of class and community. Language becomes both a site of interaction and a subtle indicator of hierarchy.

Ultimately, *Dahanu Road* exemplifies how Indian social realism moves beyond mere representation to critique. By foregrounding marginalized lives and exposing systemic imbalances, the novel situates itself within a



broader literary effort to document and challenge the lived realities of inequality in India.

Ganpat: The Tragic Subaltern:

In *Dahanu Road*, Ganpat emerges as a deeply symbolic figure of the subaltern subject—one whose existence is shaped by systemic marginalization and whose voice remains largely unheard within dominant social structures. His characterization aligns closely with subaltern studies discourse, where individuals from oppressed communities are denied agency, representation, and historical visibility. Ganpat's life, and ultimately his death, exemplify how structural inequalities translate into personal tragedy.

Ganpat's position within the narrative is defined by displacement and exclusion. Once a trusted worker on Shapur Irani's farm, he is expelled after being caught stealing money. This act, rather than being framed as a moral failing, reflects the economic desperation that governs subaltern existence. His removal from the farm signifies more than job loss—it represents the severing of his only connection to stability and belonging. From that moment onward, Ganpat is pushed further into the margins, where survival itself becomes uncertain.

His return to the farm, culminating in his suicide, is laden with symbolic weight. The act of hanging himself from a chickoo tree—a site associated with productivity, wealth, and generational continuity for the Irani family—transforms the space into one of death and protest. The tree, which sustains the elite, becomes the instrument of a laborer's annihilation, thereby exposing the violent

undercurrents of seemingly benign economic systems.

What distinguishes Ganpat as a tragic subaltern is the burden of historical trauma he carries. The narrative reveals his childhood experience of brutal violence inflicted upon his community by landlords, an event that leaves an indelible psychological scar. The image of his infant sister's death and his mother's helpless grief becomes a recurring nightmare that shapes his adult consciousness. This intergenerational trauma underscores that Ganpat's suffering is not isolated but rooted in a long history of exploitation and violence.

Furthermore, Ganpat's inability to articulate his pain reflects the silencing of subaltern voices. His inner world is mediated through others—through Kusum's recollections and the narrator's insights—rather than through direct expression. This narrative choice reinforces Gayatri Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot easily "speak" within dominant discourses.

Ultimately, Ganpat's suicide is not merely an act of personal despair but a culmination of systemic neglect, historical injustice, and psychological burden. His death serves as a stark reminder that in socially stratified worlds like that of *Dahanu Road*, the subaltern is often visible only in moments of crisis—when it is already too late.

Kusum: Gendered Marginalization:

In *Dahanu Road*, Kusum stands as one of the most powerful representations of gendered marginalization, embodying the intersection of class, tribal identity, and patriarchy. Unlike Ganpat, whose tragedy is shaped primarily by economic and historical forces, Kusum's suffering is intensified by her



position as a woman within an already oppressed community. Her character reveals how gender operates as an additional axis of exploitation, compounding the effects of poverty and social exclusion.

Kusum's life is marked by domestic violence and coercion within her marriage. Her husband's abuse is not only physical but also psychological, reducing her autonomy and reinforcing her vulnerability. The marks on her body—subtly noticed but deeply significant—become symbols of silent suffering. These signs of violence are not publicly acknowledged but are internalized, reflecting how patriarchal oppression often remains hidden within private spaces. Kusum's inability to escape this abusive relationship highlights the absence of institutional support systems for women in marginalized communities.

Her father Ganpat's suicide is directly linked to her condition, creating a devastating chain of cause and effect. Kusum internalizes responsibility for his death, believing that her suffering drove him to seek financial help and ultimately to despair. This moment is crucial in understanding gendered marginalization: the victim not only endures violence but also absorbs guilt for consequences beyond her control. The line of thought that "it was her fault that he killed himself" illustrates the psychological burden placed upon women, where systemic failures are reinterpreted as personal shortcomings.

Kusum's response to her father's death further underscores her resilience within oppression. Her act of digging his grave herself is both literal and symbolic. It reflects the absence of communal or institutional care, forcing her to perform roles traditionally reserved for others. At the same time, it

demonstrates a quiet strength—a capacity to endure and act despite overwhelming grief. This duality of vulnerability and resilience is central to her characterization.

Moreover, Kusum's interaction with Zairos reveals entrenched social hierarchies. While she briefly expresses anger and grief openly, she quickly returns to a posture of submission in his presence. This shift indicates how power dynamics regulate even emotional expression, especially for marginalized women. Her voice is momentarily assertive but ultimately constrained by class authority.

Through Kusum, Irani exposes the layered nature of marginalization, where gender amplifies the effects of economic and social inequality. Her story is not just one of individual suffering but a broader commentary on how patriarchal and class structures intersect to limit agency. In presenting Kusum's lived reality with stark honesty, *Dahanu Road* underscores the urgent need to recognize and address the compounded vulnerabilities faced by women at the margins of society.

Zairos: A Mediator Figure:

In *Dahanu Road*, Zairos occupies a crucial middle position between inherited privilege and emerging moral awareness, making him a significant mediator figure within the novel's social structure. He belongs to the Irani landowning class and therefore benefits from the authority, security, and prestige attached to property and lineage. At the same time, he is more introspective and emotionally responsive than the older generation, especially his grandfather Shapur Irani. This dual location allows him to function as a bridge between dominance and dispossession, though the



mediation he offers remains incomplete and deeply conflicted.

Zairos's first encounter with Ganpat's corpse immediately reveals this complexity. He is shocked, unsettled, and physically repelled by the sight and smell of the dead body. His reaction is human and immediate, but it also exposes the social distance between himself and the Warli laborers. Ganpat is not merely a dead man to him; he is a former worker, a tribal, someone whose life has always existed on the edge of Zairos's awareness. Thus, even at the moment of crisis, Zairos's sympathy is filtered through class separation.

Yet Zairos is not devoid of compassion. He takes responsibility for informing others, calls Damu, arranges for Kusum to be brought to the farm, and tries to manage the situation with some degree of care. These actions suggest that he feels a moral obligation toward the marginalized people who inhabit the world around him. He does not respond with the total emotional detachment that characterizes older feudal authority. In this sense, he mediates between the cold logic of hierarchy and the possibility of humane response.

However, his mediation is limited by the very power structure that forms him. When Kusum mentions that Ganpat had come to meet Shapur Seth, Zairos sharply stops her and insists on preserving the authority and dignity of his grandfather. In that moment, his identification with elite order overrides his sympathy. He recognizes suffering, but he cannot fully relinquish the codes of class superiority through which he has been raised.

Zairos's relationship with Kusum also reflects this uneasy position. He senses her grief and strength, even notices a trace of dignity in her suffering, yet he continues to view her from

above, through the lens of difference. His compassion never becomes solidarity. He can observe, assist, and reflect, but not truly cross into the lived world of the oppressed.

Thus, Zairos is a mediator not because he resolves social divisions, but because he embodies their tension. Through him, Irani presents a figure caught between conscience and privilege, revealing how difficult it is for the socially advantaged to transcend the structures that define them.

Shapur Irani: Feudal Authority:

In *Dahanu Road*, Shapur Irani stands as the most potent embodiment of feudal authority, representing a worldview rooted in ownership, hierarchy, and inherited power. As the patriarch of the Irani family and the owner of extensive chickoo orchards, he symbolizes not only economic dominance but also the ideological framework that sustains social inequality. His character reflects the persistence of feudal values within a modern, postcolonial setting, where land continues to function as the primary source of identity and control.

Central to Shapur Irani's authority is his relationship with land. For him, land is not merely property but an extension of selfhood and legacy. His assertion that "without this land, we are nothing" reveals a deeply entrenched belief in ownership as the basis of existence and dignity. This perspective transforms the farm into a microcosm of feudal power, where the landowner's will dictates the lives of those who depend on it. The chickoo trees, which he treats almost as living heirs, further reinforce his sense of permanence and rootedness, contrasting sharply with the instability experienced by the Warli laborers.



Shapur's attitude toward the Warli community exposes the hierarchical logic underlying his authority. His dismissive remark that it is "impossible to know the Warli heart" reflects a refusal to engage with their humanity on equal terms. Instead of empathy, he adopts a stance of distance and generalization, reducing an entire community to stereotypes of irresponsibility and moral weakness. This dehumanization allows him to justify existing inequalities and absolve himself of responsibility for their suffering.

Unlike Zairos, who exhibits moments of moral hesitation, Shapur operates with certainty and conviction. His authority is unquestioned, both by himself and by those around him. Even in old age, his presence commands respect and obedience, indicating how deeply ingrained feudal structures are within the social fabric of Dahanu. His instructions are followed without challenge, and his worldview shapes the attitudes of the next generation.

At the same time, Shapur's authority is sustained through selective memory and historical narrative. His recollections of migration, struggle, and eventual success serve to legitimize his current position. By framing his achievements as the result of endurance and resilience, he overlooks the labor and exploitation that underpin his wealth. This selective remembrance reinforces a self-image of rightful ownership rather than structural privilege.

Ultimately, Shapur Irani represents the continuity of feudal ideology in contemporary India. Through his character, Irani critiques a system where power is naturalized, inequality is normalized, and the marginalized remain excluded from both material resources and moral consideration.

In *Dahanu Road*, space is not a neutral backdrop but a charged field where power, identity, and inequality are continuously negotiated. The novel's spatial realism is most evident in its depiction of land—particularly the chickoo orchards—which function as both economic resource and symbolic territory. Through this landscape, Irani maps the uneven distribution of power between the Irani landowners and the Warli laborers, revealing how physical space reinforces social hierarchy.

For the Irani family, land represents stability, inheritance, and authority. The orchard is carefully cultivated, irrigated, and managed, embodying a sense of continuity across generations. Shapur Irani's deep attachment to the land transforms it into a marker of identity; it is his "own country," a space where his authority is absolute. The trees themselves become extensions of his legacy—rooted, enduring, and resistant to change. This sense of permanence contrasts sharply with the precarious existence of those who work the land but do not own it.

For the Warli community, the same land carries entirely different meanings. It is a site of labor, survival, and often suffering. Their relationship to the land is mediated through exploitation; they cultivate and maintain it, yet remain excluded from its ownership and benefits. This unequal relationship is starkly dramatized in the image of Ganpat's body hanging from a chickoo tree. The tree, which symbolizes prosperity for the Iranis, becomes an instrument of death for a marginalized laborer. This inversion exposes the violence embedded within systems of ownership that appear benign on the surface.

Spatial divisions within the novel further reinforce social stratification. The



contrast between Aspi Villa and the Warli huts is particularly significant. The villa, with its structure, privacy, and relative comfort, reflects security and privilege. In contrast, the huts are fragile, exposed, and lacking basic resources, underscoring the vulnerability of their inhabitants. Movement between these spaces is limited and regulated, indicating how physical boundaries mirror social ones.

Irani also uses transitional spaces—such as the farm paths, the well, and the chai stall—to highlight moments of interaction between classes. However, these interactions rarely dissolve hierarchy; instead, they often reaffirm it. Even shared spaces remain unequal, shaped by invisible but rigid lines of authority.

Ultimately, spatial realism in *Dahanu Road* reveals that land is not merely a setting but a mechanism of control. It determines who belongs, who labors, and who suffers. By embedding social conflict within physical space, Irani demonstrates how geography itself becomes a powerful tool in maintaining and perpetuating inequality.

Language and Social Hierarchy:

In *Dahanu Road*, language operates as a crucial marker of identity, power, and social division. Far from being a neutral medium of communication, it becomes a tool through which hierarchies are constructed, negotiated, and reinforced. Irani's multilingual landscape—comprising Hindi, Gujarati, Dari, Tulu, and tribal dialects—reflects the linguistic diversity of India while simultaneously exposing the inequalities embedded within it.

One of the most striking representations of linguistic interaction occurs at Anna's chai stall, described as a vibrant yet chaotic meeting point where different communities converge.

The space is characterized as a “brothel of languages,” where tongues intermingle freely, suggesting both intimacy and exploitation. On the surface, this linguistic plurality appears democratic, as individuals from varied backgrounds share a common space. However, beneath this apparent fluidity lies a structured hierarchy, where language signals social status and cultural capital.

The Iranis' use of Dari, for instance, functions as a marker of distinction and superiority. By conversing in a language not widely understood by others, they assert exclusivity and reinforce group identity. This selective use of language creates an in-group dynamic that marginalizes those who cannot participate. Similarly, the “inferior Iranis” who speak Gujarati are portrayed as culturally diluted, highlighting how even within a community, linguistic variation can produce internal hierarchies.

For the Warli tribals, language becomes a site of marginalization. Their dialect, described as fragmented and “amputated,” reflects both their socio-economic position and their limited access to formal structures of communication. Their speech is often perceived as incomplete or inferior, reinforcing stereotypes of primitiveness and lack of sophistication. This linguistic othering contributes to their broader social invisibility, as their voices are neither fully understood nor valued within dominant discourse.

Moreover, language in the novel often mirrors power relations in interpersonal interactions. Zairos's communication with Kusum, for example, reveals how authority can shape dialogue. His ability to control the conversation and impose silence reflects not just personal dominance but the structural power he



inherits. In contrast, Kusum's speech is constrained, her words shaped by fear, grief, and social conditioning.

Irani also subtly highlights code-switching as a survival strategy. Characters shift between languages depending on context, negotiating identity and power in real time. This fluidity, however, does not erase hierarchy; instead, it underscores the constant adjustments required to navigate a stratified society.

Ultimately, *Dahanu Road* demonstrates that language is deeply intertwined with social hierarchy. It defines inclusion and exclusion, shapes identity, and reinforces existing power structures. Through its nuanced portrayal of multilingual interactions, the novel reveals how even everyday communication becomes a site where inequality is both expressed and perpetuated.

Historical Memory and Intergenerational Trauma:

In *Dahanu Road*, historical memory functions as a powerful force that shapes individual consciousness and collective identity, particularly within marginalized communities. Irani presents trauma not as a singular, isolated (event), but as a lingering inheritance—one that is transmitted across generations, embedding itself in the psyche of individuals like Ganpat and, by extension, his daughter Kusum. This intergenerational transmission of suffering becomes central to the novel's exploration of social realism.

Ganpat's character is deeply marked by memories of violence inflicted upon his community during his childhood. The brutal attack on the Warli hamlet—where landlords' men destroy homes and kill an infant—constitutes a formative trauma that continues to

haunt him throughout his life. Significantly, this memory is not presented as a distant historical episode but as a recurring psychological experience. Ganpat's nightmares, his sudden awakenings, and his persistent fear indicate that the past is not past; it intrudes into the present with unsettling intensity. In this sense, trauma becomes cyclical rather than linear, refusing closure.

This inherited memory also disrupts traditional notions of time. For Ganpat, history collapses into the present, creating what might be termed a "continuous present of suffering." His inability to escape these memories contributes to his emotional fragility and eventual suicide. Thus, his death cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical violence that precedes it. The personal becomes inseparable from the collective, and the present from the past.

Kusum, though belonging to the next generation, is not free from this inherited burden. While she may not have directly experienced the violence that shaped her father's life, she inherits its consequences in the form of poverty, vulnerability, and emotional instability within her family. Her father's trauma manifests in his behavior—his fear, his protectiveness, his breakdowns—and these, in turn, shape her childhood and psychological development. In this way, trauma is transmitted not only through memory but also through lived experience and familial relationships.

Irani further emphasizes that such trauma is systemic rather than accidental. The violence inflicted upon the Warlis is not tied to a single community or religion but is shown to be a product of broader structures of power and exploitation. This universality of oppression suggests that historical trauma is embedded



within socio-economic systems, making it difficult to eradicate.

Ultimately, *Dahanu Road* portrays historical memory as both a burden and a testimony. While it perpetuates suffering, it also bears witness to injustices that might otherwise be erased. By foregrounding intergenerational trauma, Irani underscores the enduring impact of history on marginalized lives, revealing how the past continues to shape—and often limit—the possibilities of the present.

In *Dahanu Road*, social realism functions not merely as a descriptive mode but as a form of ethical intervention that compels readers to confront the realities of marginalization, inequality, and systemic violence. Irani does not simply depict the lives of his characters; he positions the narrative in such a way that it challenges the reader's moral complacency. Through this strategy, the novel transcends representation and becomes an act of witnessing, urging recognition of those lives that are often rendered invisible.

A key aspect of this ethical intervention lies in Irani's refusal to romanticize poverty or suffering. The Warli community is not portrayed through a sentimental or exotic lens; instead, their lives are shown in their harsh material conditions—marked by deprivation, exploitation, and vulnerability. Ganpat's suicide, for instance, is not framed as a dramatic or heroic act but as a tragic culmination of systemic neglect and historical trauma. By presenting such events without embellishment, Irani forces the reader to engage with the structural causes behind individual suffering rather than seeking emotional catharsis.

Similarly, Kusum's experience resists simplification. Her grief, anger, and resilience are depicted with stark honesty, revealing the

complexities of gendered oppression within marginalized communities. The narrative does not offer her redemption or escape; instead, it situates her within a cycle of hardship that continues beyond the immediate moment of tragedy. This refusal to resolve her suffering ethically implicates the reader, who is left to grapple with the persistence of injustice rather than being comforted by narrative closure.

Irani's ethical realism is also evident in his portrayal of the Irani elite, particularly through characters like Zairos and Shapur Irani. Rather than presenting them as outright villains, the novel exposes their complicity in maintaining unequal structures. Zairos's partial empathy and Shapur's entrenched authority highlight how privilege operates not only through overt exploitation but also through everyday attitudes, decisions, and silences. This nuanced characterization prevents the reader from adopting a simplistic moral binary; instead, it reveals how systems of inequality are sustained by ordinary individuals.

Another dimension of ethical intervention in the novel is its attention to voice and silence. While the Warli characters are central to the narrative, their voices are often mediated or constrained, reflecting the broader social reality in which marginalized communities struggle to articulate their experiences within dominant frameworks. This narrative strategy mirrors the very condition it critiques—the difficulty of making subaltern voices heard—thereby prompting readers to question whose stories are told and whose remain suppressed.

Furthermore, Irani's use of detailed, sensory descriptions intensifies the ethical impact of the text. The physicality of suffering—the smell of Ganpat's decomposing



body, the heat of the sun, the texture of the soil Kusum digs—creates an immersive experience that resists detachment. The reader is not allowed to remain a distant observer but is drawn into the immediacy of the characters' lives.

Ultimately, *Dahanu Road* demonstrates that social realism can serve as a powerful ethical tool. By exposing the structures that produce inequality and by humanizing those who endure its consequences, the novel demands not only understanding but also accountability. It challenges readers to move beyond passive consumption of narrative toward a more engaged and reflective awareness of social realities, thereby fulfilling the deeper purpose of literature as a catalyst for ethical consciousness.

Conclusion:

Dahanu Road is a powerful exploration of social realism through its depiction of marginalized lives. Characters like Ganpat and Kusum reveal the structural nature of suffering, while figures like Zairos and Shapur expose the moral ambiguities of privilege.

Irani's work ultimately demonstrates that marginalization is not accidental but systemic—rooted in history, sustained by power, and internalized by its victims. Through its layered narrative, the novel becomes a critical commentary on postcolonial India's unfinished struggles with inequality.

Works Cited:

1. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
2. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin

Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

3. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Progress Publishers, 1959.
4. Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Classics, 2002.
5. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988.
6. Irani, Anosh. *Dahanu Road*. HarperCollins India, 2010.