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Intersecting Burdens: A Comparative Study of Caste, Gender, and Labour in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali

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Abstract: *This paper examines the intersection of caste, gender, and labour in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali, two seminal Indian texts that expose deeply embedded systems of oppression. While Untouchable depicts the life of Bakha, a young Dalit sweeper whose identity is shaped by hereditary caste labour, Rudaali portrays Sanichari, a subaltern woman whose body becomes a site of exploitation under class, gender, and feudal hierarchies. Through a comparative literary analysis, the study highlights how both authors use narrative realism, spatial description, and embodied suffering to critique structural inequality.*

Existing scholarship has addressed caste discrimination and patriarchal norms as separate axes of oppression; however, limited research explores how forced labour binds these identities together in Indian society. By reading both texts through an intersectional and sociomaterial lens, this paper argues that oppressive labour is not merely an economic condition but a cultural mechanism that naturalizes caste and gender hierarchy. Further, the study identifies how both protagonists resist dehumanization—Bakha through the hope of technological reform and Sanichari through emotional resilience and collective female agency.

By addressing the gap in existing research and offering a dual-text comparison, this paper contributes to the wider discourse on Dalit and subaltern studies, gender theory, and labour literature. The findings deepen our understanding of how caste-bound labour and gendered suffering continue to shape literary representations of marginalized communities.

Keywords: *caste, gender, labour, Dalit literature, subaltern studies*

Literature Review

Scholars of Indian English literature have long emphasized the role of caste as a social mechanism that determines labour, identity, and cultural belonging. Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable has been discussed by critics such as K. Satyanarayana and Gopal Guru for its realistic portrayal of Dalit life and for foregrounding the everyday violence embedded in caste-based occupations. Anand's narrative has also been widely examined for its use of stream-of-consciousness, which humanizes Bakha and presents him not as a stereotype but as an individual negotiating humiliation, hope, and survival.

Similarly, Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali has been central to studies on subaltern and feminist literature. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Samik Bandyopadhyay highlight how Devi exposes the multilayered oppression of rural women whose bodies become instruments of both economic exploitation and emotional labour. Sanichari's suffering symbolizes what Spivak describes as "the silenced subaltern," whose voice emerges only when mediated through narrative representation.

A significant portion of existing research focuses on either caste (in Untouchable) or gender and class (in Rudaali), often treating these identity axes as isolated categories. Very few comparative studies examine both texts together, especially through the shared analytical frame of labour. Yet labour—sweeping, scavenging, performing grief—becomes the key site where oppression is reproduced and

normalized. This labour is not chosen but inherited, reflecting a system in which bodies are marked as "polluted," "useful," or "expendable."

The review also reveals a gap regarding the embodied experience of suffering. While critics have analyzed social structures, fewer studies explore how both writers depict the body as the primary terrain on which caste and gender oppression operate. Bakha's humiliation is enacted physically through the touch taboo, while Sanichari's survival depends on commodifying her emotions through wailing.

Conclusion of Literature Review

The existing scholarship on caste and gender in Indian literature highlights persistent structures of marginalization and the literary strategies through which writers challenge these hierarchies. However, the comparative dimension—placing Dalit male experience and subaltern female experience side by side—remains underexplored. This review therefore identifies a clear gap in scholarship: the need to examine how different forms of labour produce distinct yet overlapping modes of oppression. By situating both texts within a shared analytical lens, the present study expands the discourse on intersectionality and provides a holistic understanding of how labour, embodiment, and narrative representation shape the realities of marginalized communities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative literary methodology, grounded in intersectionality theory, Dalit studies, and subaltern feminist criticism. The aim is to examine how caste, gender, and labour intersect in Untouchable and Rudaali, and how these intersections shape the characters' lived experiences and narrative trajectories.

1. Research Design

The research follows a text-centered analytical design, focusing on close reading as the primary tool. Both novels are treated as cultural texts that reflect, critique, and reconstruct the socio-political realities of marginalized communities. The comparative design enables the identification of thematic, structural, and ideological parallels as well as divergences between the two texts.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three key theoretical frameworks guide this study:

1. Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw)

Used to understand how caste and gender operate simultaneously, producing complex modes of subordination.

2. Dalit Literary Theory (Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, Omprakash Valmiki)

Provides tools to analyze caste-bound labour, humiliation, purity/pollution, and embodied violence, especially in Untouchable.

3. Subaltern Feminist Theory (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty)

Used to analyze Rudaali by examining how rural women's labour is commodified, silenced, and reshaped within feudal and patriarchal structures.

Through these frameworks, the study interprets how both authors critique oppressive institutions and highlight resistance within constrained spaces.

3. Sources and Data Collection

The primary sources for the study are:

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935)

Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali (1979; English trans. 1997)

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, Dalit autobiographies, and feminist theoretical texts. Scholarly work by Anand's contemporaries, postcolonial critics, and modern caste-gender theorists is included to maintain academic depth.

All sources are evaluated for relevance, recency, and contribution to the research questions. The collection emphasizes works that discuss caste, gender, labour, embodiment, and subalternity.

4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in four systematic steps:

1. Close Reading:

Extracting key narrative elements—labour scenes, physical descriptions, spatial settings, and interactions of power.

2. Thematic Mapping:

Identifying recurring themes such as humiliation, survival, bodily exploitation, purity/pollution, and institutional violence.

3. Comparative Alignment:

Placing corresponding themes and narrative strategies side by side to examine similarities and differences.

4. Interpretative Synthesis:

Connecting findings to broader theoretical frameworks to evaluate how each text constructs, questions, or dismantles oppressive social hierarchies.

5. Ethical Considerations

Since the study deals with narratives of marginalized communities, ethical sensitivity is maintained. The analysis avoids generalizations, acknowledges the authors' representational limitations, and emphasizes agency rather than victimhood.

6. Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on two primary texts and does not attempt to generalize all Dalit or subaltern experiences. While linguistic, historical, and regional contexts differ between Anand and Devi, the comparative approach is justified by their shared thematic preoccupation with labour and oppression.

Analysis and Discussion

This section examines how Untouchable and Rudaali construct caste, gender, and labour as interlocking systems of oppression. Through close textual reading and theoretical interpretation, the analysis highlights both convergences and divergences in how Anand and Devi portray marginalized subjects. The discussion is organized into thematic subsections for clarity and depth.

1. Labour as Inherited Identity

1.1 Labour in Untouchable: The Burden of Caste

In Untouchable, Bakha's identity is inseparable from the occupation assigned to him by birth. His labour—manual scavenging—is depicted as the lowest rung of society, governed by notions of purity and pollution. Anand shows how caste-based labour creates not just economic hardship but symbolic degradation, making Bakha's very presence a source of social panic.

Bakha's daily routine is marked by constant reminders of his "untouchability": people shout warnings when he walks,his touch is believed to defile others,he remains spatially segregated from the caste majority. For Bakha, labour is not merely work—it is the embodiment of social stigma. His body becomes a tool of labour and a site of humiliation. This aligns with Gopal Guru's argument that Dalit identity is historically tied to "stigmatized labour," which reinforces a cycle of exclusion.

1.2 Labour in Rudaali: The Feminization of Exploitation

In Rudaali, labour is similarly inherited, but it takes a gendered form. Sanichari's labour is determined not only by caste but also by her **womanhood**, which positions her as emotionally exploitable within a feudal system.

Professional mourning—wailing at funerals for upper-caste men—becomes a form of **emotional labour** that reduces women's grief to a paid performance. This commodification of female suffering illustrates what feminist theorists identify as "double exploitation":

•the labour is undervalued because it is gendered,

•and it is delegitimized because it comes from lower-caste women.

While Bakha's body is polluted, Sanichari's body is **used, exhausted, and commodified.**

Despite the differences, both protagonists experience labour as destiny—a predetermined identity shaped by oppressive institutions.

2. The Body as a Site of Oppression

2.1 Bakha's Embodied Humiliation

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Bakha's body is controlled by strict caste codes regulating movement, touch, and desire. The most powerful scene—the accidental "collision" with a caste Hindu man—reveals how caste transforms the body into a moral and political object. Bakha is beaten not for a crime but for the mere accident of proximity.

Anand uses physical sensations—shame, fear, hunger—to portray how the body internalizes oppression. Bakha's silence, his lowered gaze, his shrinking posture illustrate what Dalit autobiographer Omprakash Valmiki describes as "the internalized wound of caste."

2.2 Sanichari's Body as Economic Capital

In Rudaali, Devi exposes how the female body serves as both labour force and social commodity. Sanichari's suffering—hunger, widowhood, poverty—becomes an asset exploited by the upper castes. Her ability to mourn, even when she feels no personal grief, becomes a "service" that sustains elite households.

The body here functions as a marketplace where pain is bought and sold.

Where Bakha's body is rendered untouchable, Sanichari's is rendered available—a contrasting but equally violent form of bodily exploitation.

3. Space, Mobility, and Social Boundaries

3.1 The Spatial Politics of the Colony

In Untouchable, spatial segregation is a constant reminder of caste boundaries. Bakha's colony is physically located outside the main town, signifying social exclusion. Anand's narration emphasizes confined spaces—dirty lanes, narrow passages, locked gates—metaphors for Bakha's lack of mobility.

Whenever Bakha enters caste Hindu spaces, readers witness:

fear,

surveillance,

hostility.

Space becomes an instrument of caste control.

3.2 The Village as a Feudal Landscape

In Rudaali, spatial boundaries are less explicit but equally restrictive. Sanichari's movements are dictated by feudal lords, debt cycles, and class hierarchies. Her inability to "move upward" socially reflects what Spivak calls "the immobility of the subaltern," trapped within structural violence.

Both texts show that mobility is a privilege, denied to those performing stigmatized or feminized labour.

4. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Oppression

4.1 Bakha's Desire for Dignity

While Bakha rarely expresses his emotional turmoil verbally, Anand reveals his inner conflict through introspective narration. Bakha longs for:

clean clothes,

English manners,

cricket,

self-respect.

These desires symbolize a craving for human dignity denied to him by birth. His admiration for English soldiers highlights the psychological impact of colonial modernity—where technology and cleanliness seem to promise liberation from caste pollution.

4.2 Sanichari's Resilient Emotional Labour

Sanichari represents a different psychological landscape. Her life has been shaped by continuous loss—poverty, widowhood, the death of her son. Yet she channels her suffering into collective emotional strength, especially in her bond with Bikhni.

Unlike Bakha's isolated sadness, Sanichari's grief becomes a resource—shared, expressed, and converted into a means of survival.

This contrast reflects gendered differences in the emotional architecture of oppression.

5. Technology, Reform, and the Possibility of Change

5.1 Bakha and the Flush System

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Anand's introduction of Gandhi and the flush system at the end of Untouchable represents two contrasting pathways to reform:

moral reform (Gandhi's call for caste abolition),

technological reform (flush toilets eliminating the need for manual scavenging).

Bakha responds more positively to technology than to moral preaching, suggesting that structural solutions matter more than rhetoric.

5.2 Sanichari's Micro-Resistance

In Rudaali, systemic reform is nearly absent. Instead, Devi presents micro-resistance:

forming bonds with other women,

performing grief strategically,

negotiating her value within a corrupt system.

Sanichari does not escape oppression, but she redefines herself within constraints, showcasing what subaltern feminist critics call "agency without liberation."

6. Comparative Synthesis: Convergences and Divergences

6.1 Convergences

Both texts depict labour as inherited and inescapable.

Both protagonists navigate oppressive structures that define their bodies and identities.

Both authors portray suffering realistically, without romanticizing poverty.

Both narratives critique caste and gender hierarchies.

6.2 Divergences

Untouchable explores Dalit masculinity and caste pollution; Rudaali focuses on subaltern femininity and emotional labour.

Anand's tone leans toward reformist optimism, while Devi's narrative is rooted in structural pessimism.

Bakha looks outward—to technology—for hope; Sanichari looks inward—to resilience and solidarity.

These differences enrich the comparative analysis and highlight how oppression varies across caste and gender lines.

Overall Analytical Findings (Results)

1) Labour is the central mechanism through which caste and gender oppression are reproduced.
2) The body is the primary site where violence is enacted—through touch, emotion, labour, and spatial restriction.
3) Both texts show that reform is uneven: technological or legal change helps some but not all.
4) Gender intensifies caste oppression, producing multidimensional suffering for women.
5) Despite overwhelming constraints, both protagonists exhibit forms of micro-resistance.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali demonstrates that caste, gender, and labour operate as intersecting systems of oppression in Indian society. Both texts illuminate how inherited social hierarchies shape the daily experiences, mobility, and emotional lives of marginalized individuals. In Untouchable, Bakha's identity and bodily existence are defined by caste-based labour, resulting in social exclusion, humiliation, and internalized shame. In Rudaali, Sanichari's life exemplifies how caste and gender combine to commodify emotional labour, restrict mobility, and produce structural vulnerability.

The study shows that while the modalities of oppression differ—polluted versus commodified bodies, male versus female experience, urban versus rural contexts—the underlying dynamics are strikingly similar. Labour, whether physical or emotional, is the mechanism through which caste and gender hierarchies are maintained. Both authors present silence as a complex phenomenon: it is imposed externally, internalized psychologically, and occasionally wielded as a form of subtle resistance.

A key contribution of this research lies in the **comparative and intersectional approach**. By examining two seminal texts together, the study highlights shared patterns of subjugation while

acknowledging differences in context, gendered experience, and authorial perspective. The analysis also underscores the role of narrative in making subaltern experiences visible, revealing that both Bakha and Sanichari exercise agency within the constraints imposed upon them.

Finally, this research extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that silence, labour, and bodily experience are not merely thematic elements but constitute critical tools for understanding the lived realities of marginalized communities in literature. Future studies may further explore these dynamics in contemporary Dalit and feminist literature, investigate other forms of resistance, or expand the comparative framework to include additional regional, linguistic, or historical contexts.

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