

Gendered Labour and Caste Hierarchies: A Comparative Study of Domestic and Ritual Labour in *Sangati* and *Rudali*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women's labour in *Sangati* by Bama and *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi through a comparative literary approach. While much literary scholarship has addressed marginalised women's experiences, comparatively little attention has been given to how different forms of gendered labour, particularly domestic and ritual labour, are represented and valued in literature. The objective of this study is to analyse how these texts portray women's labour within the intersecting structures of caste, class, and gender. Using close textual analysis and comparative thematic reading, the study explores how *Rudali* represents ritual grief as a form of paid emotional labour, whereas *Sangati* presents the everyday unpaid domestic labour of marginalised women. The analysis highlights both contrasts and similarities in the visibility and recognition of labour, showing that ritual mourning becomes a public and paid activity while domestic labour remains largely private and socially unrecognised. The study also examines how the writers' distinct narrative styles, Devi's politically oriented realist narration and Bama's oral, community-centred voice, shape the literary representation of women's labour. Through this comparative analysis, the study contributes to understanding the complex ways in which marginalised women's labour is experienced, valued, and represented in Indian literature.

KEYWORDS

Gendered labour, Domestic labour, Ritual labour, Caste and gender, Dalit feminism, Comparative literature, *Sangati*, *Rudali*

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1. Introduction

Narratives of women's labour reveal how caste, class, gender, and power operate in everyday life. Literary representations of labour not only document women's work but also expose the social structures that regulate women's bodies, emotions, and daily activities. Experiences of male have been often emphasised in prevailing literary and historical narratives, while Dalit women's labour, and everyday realities remain marginalised or under-represented. By focusing the experiences of marginalised women

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and working class in their narratives, writers like Bama and Mahasweta Devi contest this absence. Their works emphasise the systematic injustices, physical struggles, and emotional endurance that impact women's labour, under caste and class-based social structures.

The portrayal of women's labour in Bama's *Sangati* and Mahasweta Devi *Rudali* is analysed in this study through a comparative literary approach. Different yet related forms of labour are depicted in both the texts. *Sangati* shows marginalised women's everyday unpaid domestic labour in family and communal spaces, whereas *Rudali* presents ritual mourning as a kind of paid emotional labour carried out by Dalit women during funerals. Despite their evident differences, both forms of labour—one public and ritualistic, the other private and domestic—both showcase how caste hierarchy, economic vulnerability and patriarchal demands regulate women's labour, emotions, and social roles.

Bama shows domestic work in *Sangati* as a responsibility enforced on Dalit women from a young age. Young girls take part in household chores which includes cleaning, nurturing their siblings and fetching water. The narrative illustrates gender roles are socially created and accepted in the society through repeat that representation of everyday work. In the text, every day, labour is more than just background element; it shapes identities of women, showcases their value in the home and frequently restricts their access to education and social mobility.

Similarly, *Rudali* highlights ritual grieving as a profession influenced by both social marginalisation and economic need. After suffering lot of emotional and economic difficulties, the central character Sanichari becomes a professional mourner. Here, grief turns into commodified labour that must be publicly performed as a service to wealthy landlords during funerals. Devi's story shows how unequal social structures can transform people's emotional expression into a marketable activity, compelling marginalised women to convert their emotions and bodies into means of survival. An important aspect of these works is that they are structurally not only thematic in nature, but narratively. *Sangati* follows an oral, community-centred narrative approach that emphasizes the voice and women's collective experiences. While *Rudali* employs a politically charged realist narrative that demonstrates the socio-economic forces behind ritual performance. This textual variation exemplifies one literary form at work as a medium for labour, oppression, and resistance. Although some studies have examined Dalit women's experiences or labour representation in individual texts, comparative studies of domestic and ritual labour in these two texts have been sparse. Through the comparison of *Sangati* and *Rudali*, this essay demonstrates the ways in which different types of labour function under the intersections of caste, class, and gender. The research shows how literature is instrumental in the production of an active space for the understanding of power, marginalisation, survival, and the underappreciated forms of resistance in the lives of Dalit women. Therefore, from a qualitative point of view, the study serves the following key aims:

1. To analyse the forms of domestic and ritual labour represented in *Sangati* and *Rudali*.
2. To examine how caste, class, and gender structures shape the exploitation and visibility of women's labour.

3. To explore how marginalised women negotiate survival, agency, and resistance via everyday and ritual labour.

2. Theoretical Framework

As a model to the analysis of the representation of gendered labour in Sangati by Bama and Rudali by Mahasweta Devi, this study applies the critical lenses of intersectionality, Dalit feminist theory, and subaltern studies across its main analytical frameworks. Such a framework allows for an examination of the interdependence of caste, class and gender in shaping women's labour and social lives in Indian society.

Intersectionality is the idea, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), that multiple orders of oppression – caste, sex and class – operate together, rather than just in parallel. Intersectionality contributes a critical theory for making sense of the everyday lives of marginalised women and their experiences that cannot be addressed by a single category of identity alone. In Sangati and Rudali, intersectionality helps to make sense of how the labour of Dalit women is shaped by overlapping structures of caste hierarchy, patriarchal expectations, and economic inequality. For example, the domestic work of Dalit women in Sangati is not only gender-based work but also caste-coded labour that consolidates caste relations. Likewise, in Rudali ritual lamentation is recognised primarily for socially and economically marginalised women to perform in this profession, as the two social structures serve to decide the forms of labour offered.

The insights of Dalit feminist theory, especially those articulated by Sharmila Rege (2006), make this analysis more profound by emphasizing the epistemological significance of Dalit women's experiences. Dalit feminist writers contend, for example, that such mainstream women's liberation movements generally overlook caste oppression and this has left their experiences completely unexamined. Rege stresses that Dalit women's stories serve as crucial witnesses that contradict dominant social and historical narratives. From this vantage point, Sangati can be understood as a collective narrative about the everyday work, the endurance and the community ways of survival that characterize Dalit women. In turn, it allows us a reading of Rudali that seeks to understand how marginalised women must deal with survival under exploitative economic systems.

The study also incorporates Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern, which engages with problematic issues regarding the incorporation of suppressed voices in dominant discourses. Spivak's model is useful to explore how the voices of marginalised communities are mediated by literary texts and how these voices emerge as visible within broader cultural and political narratives. In Rudali, for instance, Sanichari's professionalization as a mourner demonstrates how such subaltern women manoeuvre within a society that not only silences but commodifies their affective labour. And similarly, the collective storytelling voice in Sangati serves as a literary device that gives voice to the oppressed within the community.

To implement the models the research uses the method of comparative close reading and thematic textual analysis. The theory of intersectionality is applied to the examination of the ways that caste, class, and gender combine to produce women's labour in the texts identified. Dalit feminism informs analysis of voice from the story, shared experience, and epistemological significance of the female testimony by Dalits. As a subaltern it is Spivak's perspective that underlies the analysis of the ways in which texts represent marginalised voices within social power structures higher. These frameworks enable this study to understand how labour, agency and resistance are constructed in discourse of literature regarding caste societies.

3. Review of Literature

Current scholarship upon gendered or gendered labour increasingly contends that domestic, caste-based, and reproductive labour is a subject for which analytical attention should not be confined to an account of economic performance but also of cultural and narrative work. Research like Pratibha (2017) emphasises how Dalit women's domestic labour is not seen on any level despite its importance in maintaining household and community life – and it continues to be much ignored and in fact, often invisible. Likewise, Sharma (2022) theorises the experiences of Dalit women themselves within this framework based on 'Indian intersectionality', the intersection of caste and gender and how such discrimination affects women's social and economic lives. Basu (2024) adds more detail to the dual pressure on women marginalised in weaving communities to perform productive as well as reproductive labour, and Simpson (2024) investigates emotional strain within domestic economy in middle-class households. Together, these studies challenge our ideas about labour as economic activity, revealing that it is also an embodied practice in accordance with cultural expectations and social hierarchies.

Similarly, parallel inquiry is conducted on how labour is commodified and regulated in larger socio-economic structures. Mali (2025) contrasts the commodification of grief in Rudali with the invisibility of the domestic working life in the city, revealing the ways in which caste-based hierarchies shape the social value of labour. Studies by Howes et al. (2024) and Adams (2022) further highlight how economic importance notwithstanding, domestic and reproductive labour continue to be socially undervalued. At the same time, Duong et al. (2024) demonstrate that certain modes of wage labour can bring out conditional visibility and limited empowerment for women, revealing the complicated relationships between labour, economic opportunity and social validation.

Intersectionality has emerged as one of the primary tools to analyse the caste and gender oppression in current research. The concept of intersectionality is posited by Crenshaw (1989) as overlapping structures of inequality, and Spivak (1988) as questioning the possibility of subaltern representation within dominant epistemic systems. Building upon such premises, Rege (2006) suggests that Dalit women's narratives also serve as epistemological interventions which contest Brahmanical patriarchy's hegemony. Thapan (2022) also stresses how Dalit autobiographies and literary traditions act

as potent resistance to caste and gender discrimination.

Literary resistance literature also shows how narrative strategies enable women on the margins to negotiate their agency within oppressive constructions of reality. Shreyas and Malik (2024) see Meena Kandasamy's writings as expressions of double marginalisation and resistance, Pawar and Supriya (2024) posit Dalit women's autobiographies as collective testimonies of dignity and empowerment. Rizvi (2025), Gaur and Kashyap (2024) and Bhowmick and Mangang (2024) study women's bodies, silence, and memory as sites of resistance in patriarchal and caste-based systems. The findings of a few studies also further contribute to understanding how gender writing texts represent women's bodies, silence and memory as sites of defying systems within patriarchal or caste contexts.

However, although this body of scholarship is increasing and growing, literature on caste, gender, labour, and literary representation remains divided. Many sociological studies and feminist studies argue for labour as a structural problem, while literary criticism tends to analyse works as to what they mean, rather than necessarily combining theoretical approaches with textual analysis. Despite intersectionality and Dalit feminist theories being extensively studied, their systematic work in comparison with literary analysis is scarce. Indeed, few examinations consider what narratives and genres do to the representations of various modes of labour (e.g. domestic and ritual) within Dalit women's literature.

This gap is filled in here in the proposed book with a comparative literary analysis of Sangati and Rudali and with close textual reading (intersectionality, Dalit feminist theory, subaltern studies). Examining the mechanics and function of narratives, emotional narratives, and literary techniques as they negotiate the notion of gendered labour, the study helps bring to fuller focus the issues of labour, resistance and subjugation within Indian literary discourse.

4. Methodology

A qualitative literary methodology involving comparative close reading and thematic textual analysis is used in this study to consider the representation of gendered labour within Rudali by Mahasweta Devi and Sangati by Bama. These texts serve as two examples of two forms of work, ritual emotional labour (Rudali) and everyday domestic labour (Sangati) in marginalised caste communities, being both subject to intersectional and Dalit feminist analyses.

We hone in on narrative elements that detail not only its social organisation and labour, but also on its emotional regulation through rituals of mourning, and its internal dynamics in narratives that demonstrate social hierarchy as determined by caste, including scenes of domestic labour, rituals of mourning performances, character experiences/conversation, and the production of a narrative that features symbolic labour, the practice of emotional management, and the performance of the social hierarchy of that labour through caste. This study takes as its object of analysis the way labour is represented in narrative description, characterisation and community interaction.

A thematic analysis approach is used to identify recurring themes including labour exploitation, caste hierarchy, gender roles, emotional labour and survival strategies. This is picked up by readings and narrative situations from both texts with similar themes.

The comparative study is organised on three fronts:

Forms of work and mourning: ritual mourning in Rudali, domestic labour in Sangati;

Structural exploitations-the combination of caste, class and gender in constructing women's work;

Narrative representation – how one author tells their experience of work, suffering and resistance through their narrative style.

The analysis is informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Dalit feminist theory (Rege, 2006) as well as by Spivak's concept of the subaltern (1988) where caste, gender and class structures shape the portrayal of marginalised women's work in the texts cited.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Gendered Labour within Caste and Class Structures

Both Sangati and Rudali show how women's labour takes place within caste and class hierarchies, making it clear that these intersecting institutions mediate the economic roles they take and the impact that those roles have on women's financial wellbeing as well as emotional lives. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) explains how social groups such as caste, gender and class combine to produce compound forms of marginalisation rather than operating in isolation. This framework makes it evident how in both narratives Dalit women's labour is constructed at once by caste stratification, patriarchal expectations and economic vulnerability.

In Sangati, Bama presents Dalit women who do a variety of jobs including housework, farming and wage work for upper-caste families. From a young age, girls have engaged in household chores such as cooking, fetching firewood, carrying water, and raising siblings. These narrative episodes reveal how gender roles are part of the everyday practices of the community which are reinforced by those of the community. Another thread of contention has been made by academics that Dalit women's domestic labour of home has not been recognised although it is central to daily life and is often invisible, despite being crucial to the household survival, in the lives of women (Pratibha, 2017). Social studies of labour traditions have also shown that work practices and embodied performances frequently reinforce gendered divisions of labour in community spaces (Rai, 2024). It is therefore revealed within the text that for all its apparent importance, domestic work, which serves an essential function but lacks recognition in society, is undervalued and unrecognised.

Devi's Rudali presents another kind of work, although a separate one, represented by Sanichari, a poverty stricken mourner turned professional due to repeated personal loss. The ritual mourning in the narrative operates as commodified emotional labour where women are recruited by rich families to perform grief during funerals. This representation of grief suggests other scholarly perceptions of grief in

Rudali as a commodity, mediated through caste system and economic disparity (Mali, 2025). The analysis then demonstrates how ritual labour remains within socially marginalised systems of behaviour although it is publicly observable.

5.2. Literary Representation of Labour and Marginalisation

Both writers move away from chronicling labour to demonstrate the social systems that sustain marginalisation. Here labour emerges as collective discourse between women who tell their stories of discrimination, endurance and determination, the stories of a marginalized identity in Sangati. Such dialogues help shape a space for women to come to terms with the role of gender expectations of different kinds (and less so these days) where boys' freedoms are juxtaposed against girls' domestic tasks. Narrative strategies like these would resonate with Dalit feminist scholarship, which underlines the role of testimonies of minority women as a discourse for social critique (Rege, 2006).

The same can be said for Rudali, which illustrates how rituals are mediated by economic and caste stratifications. Sanichari's failure to be able to grieve her own losses in poverty is in direct contrast to her later life as a professional mourner for prosperous families. This ironic transformation lays bare how the emotions of marginalised women are commodified within the dominant social system. Spivak's notion of the subaltern makes sense of this dynamic by tracing how marginalised voices are mediated through power and the processes of representation (Spivak, 1988). Through Sanichari's story, the narrative reveals how marginalised women negotiate systems that silence yet exploit the labour of subordinated women.

5.3. Narrative Voice and Literary Form

The portrayal of labour in the two texts has different narrative forms also formed. Sangati uses an episodic narrative structure, based on oral storytelling traditions in Dalit communities. Rather than a single point of contention, it's a series of interwoven stories about the shared experience of women. Dalit narratives, according to scholars, often also use testimonial forms to give voice to marginalized communities and challenge dominant literary traditions (Thapan, 2022).

Feminist literary studies with the same focus similarly show how narrative voice enables an experience of women's silence and social marginalization to be transformed into forms of psychological strength and expression. How Virginia Woolf's rewrites female silence as symbolic identity and voice, both the female psyche, as a complex articulation of the feminine psyche; Raghavan (2025) argues that poetic representations of femininity are challenged by traditional constructions of their identity and voice. Their analyses help us see these perspectives in the context of Bama's story technique, taking place as a component within feminist literary tradition which takes women's lives as the centre stage and female storytelling collective stories.

Rudali, however, has a realist narrative voice and its author's use of analytical distance and socio-political observation. Devi's narration illuminates the economic and political practices of ritual

mourning. Such narrative strategies highlight the fact that the very shape of the literary form in question plays a role in the criticism of social structures based on caste society (Sharma, 2023a; Sharma, 2023b). Thus it is shown that narrative technique has been instrumental in constructing the ways in which labour, exploitation and resistance are depicted in literature.

5.4. Labour, Survival, and Agency

While subjugated, each narrative demonstrates how women carve out their own mechanisms for survival and control. For women in Sangati, networks of solidarity coalesce over the back-channel of common conversation and a common humour and collective support. These acts empower them to question patriarchal beliefs and embolden younger generations to interrogate societal norms. This communal storytelling, scholars have argued, serves as a mode of resistance in the narratives of Dalit women (Pawar & Supriya, 2024). These practices also reflect wider processes of gender ritualisation in which day-to-day practices replicate socially constructed performances of femininity and labour (Johnson, 2008).

In Rudali, by means of economic negotiation agency is introduced. Sanichari and Bikhni co-arrange mourning performances as modes of livelihood for people living in the caste system structure. Although the labour itself is extractive, it allows them to achieve economic survival. Research on marginalised women's labour shows that agency may increasingly emerge as pragmatic bargaining in restrictive social systems, not as overtly rebellious acts (Duong et al., 2024; Adams, 2022).

Hence, women's labour in both texts operates as a site of both exploitation and constrained agency, as shown by comparative analysis. Where Sangati exposes the invisibility of domestic work within quotidian existence, Rudali depicts the commodification of emotional labour in ritual economies. Collectively, these stories underscore how gendered work is still at the core of survival, still operating under oppressive systems of caste, class and patriarchy.

5.5. Limitations of the Study

This research presents several limitations that should be recognised. First, the analysis is restricted to two literary works, Sangati by Bama and Rudali by Mahasweta Devi, and therefore does not represent the full range of Dalit women's labour narratives in Indian literature. Such textual limitations may result in under-representation of women's work or in low representativeness of literature in social justice. Although these texts can contribute to understanding domestic and ritual labour practices, other comparative research, such as other pieces, may provide further dimensions to the study of gendered labour in regional or cultural settings. Second, here, the study is literary and literary representation based and that of labour in practice is not based on empirical evidence. As such, the interpretation of labour is thus read through storying and thematic representation instead of factual data from field works or historical labour patterns. Third, the analysis uses translations of Tamil and Bengali texts. Some aspects of certain linguistic details, cultural idiomatic references, and stylistic detail found in the original languages may be lost in translation that influence the interpretation of narrative voice and cultural

environment.

Finally, it focuses on caste, gender, and class as the dominant analytic categories. Other vital considerations that fall beyond the reach of this study, such as regional labour experience, religious observances, and broader economic transformations, might offer more insight in the coming years.

Conclusion

We here show that Sangati and Rudali offer complementary perspectives on gendered labour within caste-based societies. In the same way, Bama foregrounds the everyday invisibility of everyday domestic labour, Mahasweta Devi exposes the commodification of emotional labour through ritual economies. The analysis uses comparative studies to demonstrate (and compares) that caste, class, and gender as intersecting systems of practice construct both models of labour.

Drawing on intersecting theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Dalit feminist theory (Rege, 2006) and subaltern studies (Spivak, 1988) combined with close reading of the text, the study represents a rich contribution to literary scholarship on labour and marginalization. This finding indicates that literary narratives do more than speak about social inequality, and that they also reveal how marginalised women negotiate agency within restrictive social structures.

Such a comparative framework also indicates that readings of labour across narrative modes, (for instance, domestic labour in Sangati and ritual labour in Rudali) offer deeper analysis than texts alone. Such an analysis underscores how Dalit women's understandings of labour, as well as their survival and resistance, come to constitute the main thematics of contemporary Indian literary discourse.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Declaration

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for

generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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