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## **Intersecting Oppressions: A Comparative Study of Gender and Caste in The Dark Holds No Terrors and Sangati**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the intersection of gender oppression and caste discrimination in Indian literature through an analysis of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande and *Sangati* by Bama. While Deshpande's novel portrays patriarchal oppression within an upper-caste setting, Bama's work highlights the dual marginalization of Dalit women, who face both caste- and gender-based discrimination. The research examines how social hierarchies shape female experiences and the ways in which the protagonists resist oppression. Using feminist literary theory, Dalit feminism, and intersectionality, this study employs a comparative textual analysis of both novels. Findings suggest that high-caste women experience oppression within the home, while Dalit women face systemic, collective struggles, highlighting the varied dimensions of female subjugation in Indian society.

**Key Words:** Gender Oppression ,Caste Discrimination ,Intersectionality ,Dalit Women , Patriarchy & Feminist Literary Theory Marginalization

### **Introduction:**

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), highlights how multiple forms of oppression—such as gender and caste discrimination intersect to shape individual experiences. In India, caste and patriarchy together create unique forms of marginalization for women, with Dalit women facing both caste-based violence and gender subjugation. While upper-caste women are primarily oppressed within patriarchal structures, Dalit women experience systemic social and economic discrimination in addition to domestic oppression.



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Indian literature has long served as a medium to expose these struggles. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) explores the constraints of patriarchy on an educated, upper-caste woman, while Bama's *Sangati* (1994) presents the collective experiences of Dalit women, emphasizing the compounded oppression of caste and gender. By comparing these texts, this study examines how intersectionality influences oppression and resistance in Indian women's lives.

The research focuses on the following key questions: How do caste and gender shape the protagonists' suffering? What are the differences in their resistance and agency? Through a comparative analysis, this study highlights how oppression manifests differently for women based on their caste position and explores the ways they navigate and challenge these social hierarchies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist literary theory provides a critical lens for analyzing gender oppression in literature, particularly through Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir argues that women are relegated to the position of the "Other" in a patriarchal society, their identities shaped in relation to men. This concept is central to *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, where the protagonist, Sarita, struggles with societal expectations that dictate a woman's role as a daughter, wife, and mother. Her psychological and emotional subjugation reflects the patriarchal structures that deny women autonomy, even within an upper-caste setting.

Dalit feminism expands this analysis by incorporating caste-based oppression. Scholars such as Gopal Guru (1995) and Sharmila Rege (2006) argue that Dalit women's experiences cannot be explained through mainstream feminism alone, as they face both gender-based and caste-based violence. *Sangati* exemplifies this dual marginalization, portraying Dalit women's struggles against economic exploitation, sexual violence, and social exclusion. Unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women's oppression is often collective rather than individual, as caste structures limit their mobility, access to education, and basic dignity.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory provides a crucial framework for understanding these overlapping oppressions. By comparing the experiences of Sarita (upper-caste) and Dalit women in *Sangati*, this study explores how caste and gender intersect to shape different forms of resistance and agency, highlighting the varied nature of women's oppression in Indian society.



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### Analysis of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) examines the psychological and emotional struggles of Sarita, an upper-caste, educated woman, trapped in patriarchal constraints. Despite her financial independence as a doctor, she suffers domestic violence at the hands of her husband, Manu. This paradox aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" (*The Second Sex*, 1949), where women, irrespective of education or class, remain subordinate to men within marriage. Sarita's experience highlights how patriarchy operates beyond economic empowerment, reinforcing traditional gender roles. A central theme is domestic violence and its psychological toll. Manu's insecurity over Sarita's professional success drives him to assert control through **physical abuse**, exposing the fragility of masculinity in patriarchal structures. Sarita, despite her education, is silenced by fear and guilt. Her internal conflict is evident when she reflects:

*"I had always known that a wife must be subordinate to her husband.  
But I had never thought I would be punished for breaking the rule"*  
(Deshpande, 112).

This aligns with Kate Millett's (*Sexual Politics*, 1970) argument that domestic violence is a tool of patriarchal dominance, ensuring female subjugation even in supposedly modern relationships.

The novel also critiques social expectations imposed on high-caste women. Sarita's mother's disapproval of her career reflects the traditional belief that women must prioritize domestic roles over ambition. Sarita's success as a doctor does not shield her from oppression; instead, it exacerbates the conflict between personal aspirations and gendered expectations. Her struggles resonate with Betty Friedan's (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) notion of the "problem that has no name," where educated women remain trapped in oppressive domestic spheres.

Sarita's journey is one of **self-awareness rather than liberation**. While she begins questioning societal norms, she remains uncertain about asserting her agency. Her internalized oppression prevents her from fully breaking free. This echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988) argument that women in patriarchal societies struggle to articulate resistance due to deep-rooted gender conditioning. Ultimately,



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*The Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals how patriarchal oppression transcends caste privilege, reducing even educated women to **voiceless subalterns** within marriage. Sarita's suffering underscores the limitations of feminist discourse focused solely on economic empowerment, advocating for a deeper interrogation of systemic gendered violence in both domestic and social structures.

### Analysis of Sangati

Bama's *Sangati* (1994) is a groundbreaking Dalit feminist text that exposes the double oppression of Dalit women—by caste and patriarchy. Unlike *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, which centers on individual suffering, *Sangati* portrays collective struggles, emphasizing economic hardships, sexual violence, and systemic discrimination. This aligns with Sharmila Rege's (*Writing Caste, Writing Gender*, 2006) argument that Dalit women's narratives must be understood through an intersectional lens, as their oppression is shaped by both gender and caste hierarchies. The novel's oral storytelling style serves as a tool of resistance, amplifying marginalized voices and disrupting Brahmanical patriarchal narratives.

A key theme in *Sangati* is economic hardship. Dalit women work as manual laborers, domestic workers, and agricultural laborers, yet they receive lower wages than men. Their survival is marked by physical exhaustion and exploitation, reinforcing Gopal Guru's (*Dalit Women Talk Differently*, 1995) argument that Dalit women's economic marginalization is distinct from upper-caste feminist concerns. Bama notes: "Our women cannot even afford to fall sick. The moment they do, the family will have nothing to eat" (Bama, 27). This economic precarity contrasts with Sarita's upper-caste privilege, which allows her education and career despite gender oppression.

Sexual violence is another recurring issue. Dalit women face assault not only from upper-caste men but also within their own communities, illustrating their bodies as sites of caste oppression. One woman recounts:

"Even if a man from an upper caste rapes a Dalit woman, no one will punish him. But if a Dalit man as much as looks at an upper-caste woman, he will be beaten to death" (Bama, 53).

This reflects Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which critiques how legal and social structures fail to protect marginalized women from gender-based violence. The



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impunity granted to upper-caste perpetrators further illustrates B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste as a violent, hierarchical system that sustains Brahmanical patriarchy.

However, *Sangati* is also a narrative of resistance and empowerment. Unlike *Sarita's* isolation, Dalit women rely on community solidarity. They challenge oppressive norms through small acts of defiance, such as refusing to accept lower wages or speaking out against abuse. Their collective resistance aligns with Dalit feminist critiques of mainstream feminism, which often ignores caste-based oppression. The novel's conclusion underscores hope through collective strength, advocating for Dalit feminism as a movement rooted in both gender and caste struggles. This echoes Spivak's (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988) call for marginalized voices to be heard outside elite feminist discourse.

Ultimately, *Sangati* exposes how caste and gender intersect to create a uniquely oppressive reality for Dalit women. By foregrounding their voices, Bama challenges dominant feminist narratives and advocates for a more inclusive, intersectional approach to gender justice.

### **Comparative Discussion**

Both novels align with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) theory of the "Other," where women are constructed as secondary to men regardless of class. *Sarita*, despite her education, remains subjugated in marriage, reflecting domestic patriarchy. Manu's violence mirrors Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (*Masculine Domination*, 2001), where patriarchal structures normalize male dominance. *Sarita's* internalized gender norms—"a wife must be subordinate to her husband" (Deshpande, 112)—demonstrate patriarchal conditioning that prevents women from asserting autonomy.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory explains how Dalit women in *Sangati* experience simultaneous oppression by caste and gender. Unlike *Sarita*, Dalit women suffer structural violence—economic deprivation, sexual assault, and exclusion from education—showing how Brahmanical patriarchy reinforces caste hierarchies (Gopal Guru, 1995). Bama critiques this disparity: "A high-caste woman may suffer in her home, but a Dalit woman suffers everywhere" (Bama, 46). This aligns with Ambedkar's analysis that caste is not just a social division but a mechanism of institutionalized discrimination.



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Individual vs. Collective Action : Sarita's internal rebellion reflects existential feminism, as she seeks autonomy within her limited agency. In contrast, Sangati embodies Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of collective empowerment, where marginalized groups resist oppression through shared knowledge. Dalit women's acts of defiance—demanding wages, rejecting caste norms—reflect grassroots resistance, challenging elite feminist narratives that ignore caste (Rege, 2006).

Both novels expose structural inequalities, but Sangati foregrounds caste as an intrinsic factor in women's oppression. By applying feminist, caste, and social theories, we see how gender struggles vary across class and caste, necessitating intersectional approaches to justice.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Both *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Sangati* highlight gender oppression, but caste plays a decisive role in shaping women's suffering and resistance. Sarita, an upper-caste woman, is trapped by patriarchal expectations despite her education and economic independence. Her struggles reflect how domestic oppression transcends class privilege. Conversely, Bama's Dalit women face a harsher reality where caste discrimination intersects with gender violence, limiting their agency and opportunities.

Literature plays a crucial role in exposing these intersectional injustices. Deshpande's novel critiques the psychological toll of patriarchal oppression in privileged spaces, while Bama's *Sangati* emphasizes community-based resistance and collective empowerment among Dalit women. Together, these narratives challenge dominant feminist discourses that overlook caste as a key factor in women's oppression.

Future research should broaden the scope of caste-based feminist narratives by analyzing the works of Urdu, Tamil, and Bengali Dalit women writers. Comparative studies with African-American or Indigenous feminist literature could provide a global perspective on intersectionality. Additionally, exploring contemporary Dalit feminist voices in digital media and activism would offer insight into how intersectional feminism evolves in modern India. By continuing this discourse, scholars can deepen our understanding of caste, gender, and resistance in literature and society.

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