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## Intersecting Oppressions: A Comparative Feminist, Marxist, And Postcolonial Reading Of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* And Anita Desai's *Clear Light Of Day*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* through the intersecting lenses of Feminist, Marxist, and Postcolonial criticism. The analysis explores how gendered labour—whether commodified in rural caste-based economies or rendered invisible in urban middle-class households—serves as the nexus where patriarchy, capitalism, and colonial legacy converge. While *Rudali* depicts the commodification of grief as a survival strategy within feudal-capitalist rural Bengal, *Clear Light of Day* portrays unpaid domestic caregiving in a Partition-scarred Delhi household. By reading these texts comparatively, the study reveals the persistent entanglement of gendered oppression with class structures and historical legacies of colonialism, challenging linear narratives of liberation in postcolonial India.

### 1. Introduction

Indian literature by women authors has long been a site for interrogating the intertwined structures of patriarchy, caste, class, and colonial legacy. Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, though differing in setting, linguistic medium, and class context, share an investment in representing women's survival strategies under socio-economic and cultural constraints. *Rudali*, first published in Bengali in 1979, foregrounds Sanichari, a lower-caste widow in rural Bengal who becomes a professional mourner, thereby commodifying grief. *Clear Light of Day*, published in English in 1980, is set in Old Delhi and centres on Bim Das, an unmarried schoolteacher caring for her autistic brother Baba while reflecting on her family's fragmentation after Partition.

### 2. Literature Review

Scholarship on *Rudali* has often emphasised its feminist and subaltern dimensions (Spivak 1988; Banerjee 1995), highlighting Sanichari's negotiation of agency within caste oppression. Marxist readings have drawn attention to the commodification of emotion and the hybrid persistence of feudal and capitalist exploitation (Ahmad 1992). Postcolonial critics have situated the novella within discourses of decolonisation and rural resistance (Chatterjee 1993; Ngũgĩ 1986). In contrast, *Clear Light of Day* has attracted extensive analysis as a Partition novel and domestic allegory (Srivastava 2001; Kaul 2009), with feminist readings foregrounding Bim's rejection of marriage norms (Jain 1994) and Marxist approaches exploring middle-class decline. However, few studies have undertaken a sustained comparative analysis of the two works across feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial lenses.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs an intersectional approach, drawing on three key theoretical traditions. Feminist criticism provides tools for analysing the gendered division of labour, female agency, and solidarity (hooks 1984; Mohanty 1993). Marxist criticism offers concepts such as commodity fetishism, cultural hegemony, and reproductive labour to situate women's work within capitalist and pre-capitalist economies (Marx 1990; Gramsci 1971; Federici 2012). Postcolonial theory illuminates the persistence of colonial structures in independent India, particularly in relation to language, cultural hybridity, and Partition (Said 1993; Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1988). The intersectional framework adopted here recognises that these systems of oppression are not merely parallel but mutually constitutive.

#### 4.1 Feminist Readings

A feminist reading of *Rudali* and *Clear Light of Day* reveals how both texts interrogate the ways in which women's lives and labour are defined, constrained, and occasionally subverted within patriarchal systems. While their contexts differ—*Rudali*'s rural, caste-stratified Bengal and *Clear Light of Day*'s urban, Partition-affected Delhi—both works engage with questions of women's agency, domesticity, economic survival, and emotional resilience.

In *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi situates Sanichari at the intersection of widowhood, caste oppression, and rural poverty. Her eventual choice to become a professional mourner disrupts conventional expectations of female respectability, yet her earnings remain contingent on upper-caste patronage. The role of a *Rudali* opens a space for female solidarity and informal economic cooperation.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai presents Bim as an unmarried, middle-class woman who assumes the role of primary caregiver for her autistic brother. Her refusal to marry is an act of feminist self-determination, yet her unpaid domestic labour reflects the gendered expectation that she sacrifice personal fulfilment for family stability.

Taken together, these works show that feminist resistance is shaped by socio-economic location. Sanichari's resistance is economically driven, while Bim's is intellectual and moral. Both create small spaces of autonomy within systemic constraints.

#### 4.2 Marxist Readings

From a Marxist perspective, *Rudali* portrays the commodification of emotional labour in a feudal-capitalist rural economy. The mourning profession transforms grief into a service for hire, revealing the persistence of pre-capitalist exploitation structures alongside monetary exchange.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Marxist analysis highlights the unpaid domestic work performed by Bim, which sustains the household without financial reward. This invisible labour underpins middle-class survival but remains outside capitalist valuation.

Both texts illustrate that capitalism in postcolonial India often integrates rather than replaces older exploitative systems.

#### 4.3 Postcolonial Readings

Although *Rudali* is set in post-independence Bengal, its caste hierarchies and landlord dominance reflect colonial-era patterns of control. The ritual economy mirrors colonial extraction, while Devi's choice of Bengali resists elite Anglicised literary culture.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the Partition is both a historical rupture and a metaphor for personal division. The Das family embodies the hybrid identity shaped by colonial urban life, with English education and cultural refinement masking underlying economic fragility.

Both novels reveal that political independence did not dismantle entrenched social inequalities but reconfigured them.

## 5. Comparative Discussion

The feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial readings together reveal that gendered labour—whether commodified or unpaid—is shaped simultaneously by patriarchy, class structures, and colonial legacies. Sanichari's rural, caste-marked experience and Bim's urban, middle-class caregiving differ in form but share the same structural constraints.

Acts of resistance in both texts are embedded within systems that limit their transformative potential. Female solidarity emerges as a key survival strategy, whether through economic cooperation among *Rudali*s or reconciliation between sisters.

The comparison shows that rural and urban women's experiences in postcolonial India can be analysed through the same intersecting structures, despite surface differences.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches, when integrated, reveal the complex realities of women's lives in postcolonial India. By reading *Rudali* and *Clear Light of Day* together, this paper highlights how women's labour—whether public or private—remains undervalued and shaped by interlocking systems of oppression.

The findings suggest that Indian literary criticism benefits from intersectional analysis across linguistic, class, and regional divides. Future research might extend this comparative framework to other women's texts, explore different forms of gendered labour, or examine male-authored depictions of women's work in similar socio-historical contexts.

Ultimately, these novels remind us that liberation is not a linear process and that women's resistance often operates within rather than outside the limits imposed by historical and cultural conditions.

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