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Feminist Existentialism and Dalit Feminism: Reframing Female Suffering in Anita Desai and Bama

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of female suffering in the works of **Anita Desai** and **Bama** through the critical frameworks of **feminist existentialism** and **Dalit feminism**. While both writers foreground women's oppression within patriarchal structures, their narratives articulate suffering through markedly different experiential and ideological lenses. Drawing on feminist existentialist thought, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other," the study explores how Desai's female protagonists internalize alienation, emotional neglect, and existential anxiety within middle-class domestic spaces. Their suffering manifests as psychological withdrawal, silence, and fragmented selfhood, reflecting the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms on female subjectivity. In contrast, employing Dalit feminist theory, the paper analyzes Bama's autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives as testimonies of caste-based and gendered oppression. Bama reframes female suffering not as an individualized psychological crisis but as a collective social experience rooted in systemic caste hierarchies, economic exploitation, and institutional discrimination. Her narratives transform pain into political consciousness, resistance, and community solidarity, challenging dominant feminist paradigms that overlook caste realities. By placing feminist existentialism and Dalit feminism in dialogue, the paper argues that female suffering in Indian literature must be understood through an intersectional framework that accounts for class, caste, gender, and voice. The comparative study reveals that while Desai's women seek existential meaning within constrained personal spaces, Bama's women assert agency through speech, action, and social transformation. Ultimately, the paper redefines female suffering not merely as victimhood but as a dynamic site of identity formation, resistance, and feminist rearticulation in post-colonial Indian women's writing.

Keywords: Feminist Existentialism, Dalit Feminism, Female Suffering, Psychological Alienation, Social Oppression, Caste and Gender.

Introduction

Indian women's writing has consistently foregrounded **female suffering** as a central thematic concern, revealing the complex intersections of **gender, patriarchy, class, caste, and culture** that shape women's lived experiences. Far from being a monolithic or universal condition, female suffering in Indian literature emerges in diverse forms psychological, social, emotional, and political depending on women's social location and historical context. From the postcolonial period to contemporary times, women writers have employed fiction, autobiography, and testimonial narratives to interrogate the structures that marginalize women and to articulate modes of endurance, resistance, and selfhood.

Early feminist interventions in Indian literature often emphasized women's oppression within **domestic**

and marital spaces, focusing on emotional deprivation, silencing, and existential alienation. Writers such as Anita Desai explore the **interior landscapes of female consciousness**, portraying women whose suffering arises from patriarchal neglect, restrictive gender roles, and the denial of self-realization. These narratives privilege psychological depth, silence, and introspection, highlighting how patriarchy operates subtly through emotional abandonment rather than overt violence. In contrast, Dalit women's writing radically redefines the discourse of female suffering by foregrounding **caste as a constitutive axis of oppression**. Writers like Bama challenge mainstream feminist narratives that often universalize women's experiences while marginalizing caste realities. In Dalit feminist texts, suffering is not confined to the private realm but is experienced publicly through **economic exploitation, social exclusion, religious discrimination, and bodily violence**. Such narratives transform personal pain into collective testimony, asserting voice and agency against entrenched caste hierarchies.

Situating Anita Desai and Bama within this broader literary and ideological context allows for a nuanced examination of how **female suffering is mediated by class and caste**. While Desai's women internalize suffering as psychological crisis within relatively privileged social positions, Bama's women confront suffering as a social condition that demands resistance and communal solidarity. This comparative framework enables a critical engagement with **feminist existentialism and Dalit feminism**, revealing the limitations of singular feminist paradigms and underscoring the necessity of an **intersectional approach** to women's experiences in Indian literature. By examining female suffering through these divergent yet intersecting perspectives, the present study seeks to reframe suffering not merely as passive victimhood but as a dynamic site of identity formation, consciousness, and feminist rearticulation in Indian women's writing.

Feminist Existentialism: Theoretical Perspectives on Gendered Alienation

Feminist existentialism offers a critical framework for understanding women's oppression as a condition rooted not only in social structures but also in the **existential denial of subjectivity and freedom**. Drawing primarily on Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), feminist existentialism examines how women are constructed as the "Other" in a male-dominated world, deprived of autonomy, self-determination, and authentic

existence. Beauvoir argues that woman's suffering emerges from her historical and cultural positioning as an object rather than a subject, a condition that produces profound psychological alienation. Central to feminist existentialism is the concept of **alienation**, which refers to the estrangement of women from their own desires, identities, and creative possibilities. Patriarchal society defines women through restrictive roles wife, mother, and daughter thereby confining them to immanence while reserving transcendence, freedom, and action for men. This enforced immanence generates an existential crisis in women, manifesting as anxiety, frustration, silence, and emotional withdrawal. Feminist existentialism thus interprets female suffering as the consequence of living an inauthentic life imposed by patriarchal norms.

The existential emphasis on **choice, freedom, and responsibility** acquires a distinctly feminist dimension when applied to women's lives. Although existential philosophy posits that individuals are free to create meaning, feminist existentialists emphasize that women's freedom is structurally constrained by social expectations, cultural traditions, and economic dependence. Consequently, women's suffering is often internalized rather than openly expressed, resulting in psychological breakdowns, neurosis, or withdrawal. Gendered alienation, therefore, operates subtly through emotional neglect, silencing, and the denial of self-expression. In literary contexts, feminist existentialism enables a reading of women characters who grapple with **inner conflicts rather than overt rebellion**. Their struggles are marked by introspection, isolation, and a search for meaning within oppressive domestic and marital spaces. Such narratives foreground the psychological dimensions of female suffering, revealing how patriarchy colonizes the female mind as much as the female body.

By foregrounding the interplay between **existential freedom and gendered constraint**, feminist existentialism provides a powerful lens to analyze women's interior suffering in literature. It highlights how alienation becomes a defining condition of women's lives under patriarchy, while also gesturing toward the possibility however limited of self-awareness and resistance through consciousness. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the psychological anguish experienced by women in Anita Desai's fiction, where suffering unfolds as an inward, existential struggle shaped by gendered alienation.

Psychological Suffering and Inner Alienation in

Anita Desai's Fiction

Anita Desai's fiction is distinguished by its intense exploration of the **inner lives of women**, foregrounding psychological suffering as a central mode of female experience under patriarchy. Rather than depicting overt social rebellion or external violence, Desai focuses on the **subtle, internalized forms of oppression** that lead to emotional alienation, mental instability, and existential despair. Her women protagonists, largely drawn from middle- and upper-class urban milieus, suffer not from material deprivation but from **emotional neglect, marital incompatibility, and the denial of selfhood**, which gradually erode their psychological well-being. In novels such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Voices in the City*, and *Clear Light of Day*, Desai presents female characters who experience profound alienation within intimate relationships and domestic spaces. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* exemplifies psychological suffering caused by emotional abandonment within marriage. Her hypersensitivity, fear of death, and longing for affection remain unacknowledged by her rational, detached husband, resulting in neurosis and eventual mental breakdown. Maya's suffering reflects the feminist existentialist condition of a woman denied recognition as a subject, forced into silence and emotional isolation.

Similarly, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* embodies a life of emotional suppression masked by outward respectability. Having spent years fulfilling socially prescribed roles of wife and mother, she retreats into isolation in Carignano as a means of coping with her existential emptiness. Her withdrawal signifies not liberation but a defensive response to lifelong psychological neglect. Desai uses silence, solitude, and the natural landscape to mirror Nanda Kaul's fractured inner world, emphasizing the persistence of alienation even in chosen isolation. Desai's women frequently inhabit **liminal psychological spaces**, caught between longing for autonomy and submission to patriarchal expectations. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha's sense of suffocation within a joint family structure culminates in emotional paralysis and suicide, underscoring the destructive consequences of unarticulated suffering. Her inability to communicate her distress reveals how patriarchal domesticity functions as a site of psychological entrapment rather than emotional security.

Through techniques such as **stream of consciousness, symbolic imagery, and interior monologue**, Desai renders female suffering as an in-

ward, often invisible struggle. Madness, silence, and withdrawal emerge as recurring motifs, suggesting that psychological breakdown becomes the only available form of protest for women denied social or verbal agency. Thus, suffering in Desai's fiction is not merely personal pathology but a **structural outcome of gendered alienation**. Viewed through the lens of feminist existentialism, Anita Desai's portrayal of psychological suffering exposes how patriarchy operates at the level of consciousness, producing alienated selves who are unable to realize authentic existence. Her narratives compel readers to recognize the silent, interior dimensions of female suffering, where oppression manifests not through physical violence but through emotional deprivation and existential confinement.

Dalit Feminism and the Politics of Social Oppression

Dalit feminism emerges as a critical intervention within both mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit discourse by foregrounding the **intersection of caste and gender** as a distinct and irreducible axis of oppression. It challenges universalized notions of womanhood that often privilege upper-caste, middle-class experiences, exposing how such frameworks fail to account for the lived realities of Dalit women. Central to Dalit feminist thought is the assertion that female suffering cannot be understood in isolation from **caste hierarchy, economic exploitation, and social marginalization**, all of which shape Dalit women's everyday lives. Unlike feminist existentialism, which primarily focuses on psychological alienation and individual subjectivity, Dalit feminism situates women's suffering within **material, historical, and structural conditions**. Dalit women experience oppression not only as women within patriarchy but also as members of communities subjected to untouchability, social exclusion, and systemic violence. Their suffering is therefore public, collective, and continuous, manifesting through forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, and institutional discrimination in education, religion, and governance.

Dalit feminist scholars such as **Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Baby Kamble** emphasize that Dalit women "talk differently" because their social location produces a distinct feminist consciousness rooted in survival and resistance. Dalit feminism rejects elite feminist silence on caste and insists on the recognition of Dalit women's voices as epistemologically significant. Testimony, autobiography, and oral narratives become crucial

modes of expression, transforming personal pain into political critique. The politics of social oppression in Dalit feminism also involves a critical interrogation of **religious institutions and cultural practices** that perpetuate caste hierarchies. Conversion to Christianity or Buddhism, often seen as a path to dignity, is revealed to be fraught with continued discrimination, as caste prejudice persists even within supposedly egalitarian religious spaces. Dalit feminist writing exposes these contradictions, highlighting how oppression adapts rather than disappears.

Importantly, Dalit feminism reframes suffering as a **source of collective consciousness and agency**. While suffering is undeniably brutal and dehumanizing, Dalit women's narratives refuse victimhood by emphasizing resistance, solidarity, and self-assertion. Community bonding, education, and political awareness become tools for challenging entrenched power structures. By foregrounding caste as central to feminist analysis, Dalit feminism expands the scope of feminist theory and compels a rethinking of gender justice in India. It insists that any meaningful discourse on women's suffering must address the **politics of social oppression** that render Dalit women doubly marginalized. This theoretical framework is crucial for understanding Bama's writings, where female suffering is articulated not as an internal psychological crisis but as a collective struggle against systemic injustice.

Collective Suffering and Resistance in Bama's Narratives

Bama's writings occupy a seminal position in Dalit feminist literature for their powerful articulation of **collective suffering and communal resistance**. Unlike dominant literary traditions that individualize women's pain, Bama presents suffering as a **shared social condition**, experienced collectively by Dalit communities and, more specifically, by Dalit women. Her narratives foreground the interlocking oppressions of caste, gender, class, and religion, revealing how Dalit women's lives are shaped by systemic discrimination and everyday violence. In *Karukku*, Bama's autobiographical narrative exposes the pervasive nature of caste oppression embedded in social institutions such as education, the church, and the workplace. The text does not merely recount personal trauma but transforms individual experiences into **collective testimony**, representing the voices of an entire marginalized community. Bama's disillusionment with religious institutions, particularly the Christian Church, highlights how caste hierarchies per-

sist even within spaces that claim moral and spiritual equality. Suffering here is communal, sustained, and historically inherited, demanding a collective response rather than personal resignation.

Sangati further expands this collective dimension by documenting the everyday struggles of Dalit women within domestic and public spheres. The narrative presents a mosaic of women's lives marked by **physical labour, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and economic precarity**. Yet, alongside suffering, Bama foregrounds women's resilience, humour, and defiance. Storytelling, gossip, shared labour, and mutual support emerge as forms of resistance that challenge patriarchal and caste-based domination. The text emphasizes that resistance need not always be overtly political; it often operates through every day acts of survival and solidarity. Language plays a crucial role in articulating collective suffering and resistance in Bama's narratives. Her use of **Dalit Tamil dialect**, oral storytelling techniques, and non-linear narrative structures disrupts dominant literary norms and asserts cultural identity. By rejecting standardized, elite linguistic forms, Bama politicizes language itself, transforming it into a medium of protest and self-assertion.

Crucially, Bama's narratives redefine female suffering not as passive endurance but as a **catalyst for social awareness and transformation**. Education, critical consciousness, and collective action are repeatedly emphasized as pathways to liberation. Dalit women, though subjected to relentless oppression, emerge as agents of change who refuse silence and invisibility. Through her portrayal of collective suffering and resistance, Bama challenges both patriarchal and casteist power structures while expanding the scope of feminist discourse in India. Her narratives insist that women's emancipation cannot be achieved through individual psychological introspection alone but must be grounded in **collective struggle and social justice**.

Reframing Female Suffering: A Comparative Feminist Analysis

A comparative feminist reading of Anita Desai and Bama reveals that female suffering in Indian women's writing is neither uniform nor universal but profoundly shaped by **class, caste, and social location**. While both writers engage with patriarchy as a central structure of oppression, their narratives articulate suffering through markedly different feminist paradigms **feminist existentialism** in Desai and **Dalit feminism** in Bama. Placing these perspectives in dialogue allows for a re-

framing of female suffering beyond reductive notions of victimhood.

In Anita Desai's fiction, suffering is largely **psychological and interiorized**, experienced within the confines of domestic and marital spaces. Her women endure emotional neglect, alienation, and existential anxiety, often without the language or social support to articulate their pain. Silence, withdrawal, and mental breakdown become recurring responses to patriarchal indifference. From a feminist existentialist standpoint, this suffering reflects the denial of women's subjectivity and freedom, producing an inward crisis of identity rather than collective resistance. Desai's narratives thus illuminate how patriarchy operates subtly at the level of consciousness, shaping women's inner worlds.

In contrast, Bama's narratives foreground suffering as **social, material, and collective**, rooted in the interlocking systems of caste, gender, and class oppression. Dalit women's pain is experienced publicly through physical labour, domestic violence, social exclusion, and institutional discrimination. However, unlike Desai's characters, Bama's women refuse silence. Their suffering generates **political awareness and communal solidarity**, transforming pain into resistance. Dalit feminism, therefore, reframes suffering as a site of empowerment rather than psychological collapse. The comparative framework highlights a crucial distinction in modes of response to suffering. Desai's women often seek escape through introspection or withdrawal, reflecting the limitations imposed by their social conditioning. Bama's women, by contrast, assert agency through speech, collective action, and everyday forms of defiance. These divergent responses underscore how **privilege and marginalization shape feminist consciousness**: class privilege enables psychological introspection, while caste oppression necessitates collective struggle.

Reframing female suffering through this comparative feminist lens challenges dominant feminist discourses that prioritize individual experience while neglecting structural inequalities. The analysis demonstrates that feminist existentialism, though valuable in exposing psychological alienation, must be supplemented by Dalit feminist insights to account for caste-based realities. Together, these frameworks offer a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of women's suffering in Indian literature. Ultimately, this comparative analysis redefines female suffering not merely as an expression of pain but as a **dynamic process through which identity, agency, and resistance**

are negotiated. By juxtaposing Desai and Bama, the study emphasizes the need for feminist criticism that acknowledges difference, diversity, and the politics of location in representing women's lived experiences.

Voice, Agency, and Feminist Rearticulation

Voice and agency function as crucial markers of feminist resistance in women's writing, determining whether suffering remains an internalized condition or becomes a catalyst for transformation. In the works of Anita Desai and Bama, the movement from silence to speech or the denial of such movement reveals contrasting modes of feminist rearticulation shaped by class, caste, and ideological positioning. Examining voice and agency across these narratives highlights how women negotiate oppression and reconfigure their identities within restrictive social structures. In Anita Desai's fiction, female voice is often **fractured, muted, or internalized**. Her women characters struggle to articulate their suffering within patriarchal domestic spaces that demand emotional restraint and compliance. Silence becomes both a symptom of oppression and a limited form of resistance. Characters such as Maya, Monisha, and Nanda Kaul engage in intense introspection, yet their inner voices rarely translate into social action. Agency, in this context, remains constrained to psychological awareness rather than outward transformation. Feminist existentialism interprets this condition as a crisis of subjectivity, where women recognize their alienation but lack the social means to transcend it.

Bama's narratives, by contrast, foreground **speech, testimony, and collective articulation** as central to feminist agency. Dalit women in *Karukku* and *Sangati* assert their voices through storytelling, dialogue, and autobiographical narration, transforming silence into resistance. Language itself becomes a political tool, enabling women to name their oppression and challenge dominant casteist and patriarchal discourses. Agency in Bama's writing is not individualized but communal, rooted in shared experience and collective consciousness.

This contrast reveals two distinct modes of feminist rearticulation. In Desai, feminist consciousness emerges through **psychological self-awareness**, though it often remains confined within the private realm. In Bama, feminist consciousness is expressed through **public articulation and social engagement**, challenging both patriarchal and caste hierarchies. While Desai exposes the emotional cost of silence, Bama demonstrates the transformative power of voice. Feminist

rearticulation, therefore, must be understood as context-specific. The ability to speak, resist, and act is mediated by social privilege and structural oppression. By juxtaposing Desai and Bama, this study underscores that feminist agency cannot be measured solely by overt resistance or rebellion. Instead, it must account for the varied ways women negotiate voice and silence within their lived realities.

Ultimately, voice and agency emerge as central to reframing female suffering. Where silence constrains subjectivity, speech enables resistance. Together, the narratives of Desai and Bama expand feminist discourse by revealing how **women's voices whether silenced or spoken reshape the contours of suffering, identity, and feminist expression in Indian women's writing.**

Conclusion

This study has examined female suffering in the works of Anita Desai and Bama through the complementary yet contrasting frameworks of **feminist existentialism** and **Dalit feminism**, revealing the diverse ways in which women experience, articulate, and respond to oppression in Indian literature. By situating psychological alienation alongside social and caste-based oppression, the paper demonstrates that female suffering cannot be understood as a singular or universal condition but must be analyzed through an **intersectional lens** that accounts for class, caste, gender, and voice. Anita Desai's fiction exposes the **interior dimensions of patriarchal oppression**, where women suffer through emotional neglect, silencing, and existential confinement within domestic and marital spaces. Her portrayal of psychological suffering highlights how patriarchy operates subtly, colonizing female consciousness and producing alienation that often results in withdrawal, silence, or mental breakdown. Through feminist existentialism, Desai's narratives underscore the tragedy of denied subjectivity and the limited avenues available for women's self-realization within privileged yet restrictive social structures.

In contrast, Bama's narratives foreground **collective suffering rooted in caste and gender hierarchies**, transforming personal pain into political testimony and resistance. Dalit feminism enables a reading of Bama's works as acts of social intervention, where voice, community solidarity, and education function as tools of empowerment. Bama redefines suffering as a shared social experience that generates consciousness and challenges institutionalized injustice, thereby expanding feminist discourse beyond individual psychological

frameworks. The comparative analysis reveals that while Desai's women seek meaning through introspection and existential awareness, Bama's women assert agency through speech, action, and collective struggle. This contrast underscores the limitations of mainstream feminist models that overlook caste realities and affirms the necessity of integrating Dalit feminist perspectives into feminist literary criticism.

Ultimately, the paper reframes female suffering not merely as passive victimhood but as a **dynamic site of identity formation, resistance, and feminist rearticulation**. By bringing feminist existentialism and Dalit feminism into dialogue, the study contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of women's experiences in post-colonial Indian literature, emphasizing that true feminist critique must engage with both the **inner and outer structures of oppression** shaping women's lives.

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