

Narrating Silenced Voices: Exploring Caste, Class and Dalit Feminist Resistance in Anjali Deshpande's *Nobody Lights a Candle*

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Abstract

Caste hierarchies are being significantly reshaped in modern times. Despite rapid globalization and constitutional reforms, deeply entrenched caste inequalities continue to permeate every aspect of the lives of Dalits. While Dalit men remain vulnerable within the hierarchical caste structure, the situation of Dalit women is even more precarious, as they occupy the most marginalized position at the intersection of caste, class, and patriarchy. Dalit women experience rampant caste discrimination, exploitation, sexual violence, and denial of access to resources. Although the Dalit movement and state interventions have attempted to address caste inequalities, the specific forms of violence and disenfranchisement faced by Dalit women remain insufficiently addressed. The literary representation of Dalit women is thus not only significant but transformative, as it creates space for voices historically silenced and marginalized within the rigid caste system. Drawing on Dalit feminist theory and the critique of caste patriarchy articulated by Dr. Ambedkar, Sharmila Rege, and Gopal Guru, this paper locates the experiences of the Dalit women within the intersecting structures of caste, class, and patriarchy. Through a close reading of Anjali Deshpande's novel, *Nobody Lights a Candle*, this paper explores the complex forms of oppression faced by Dalit women. Through the lives of Suryabala, a working-class, uneducated Dalit woman whose brutal murder is met with cruel indifference, and Pushpa, an educated and financially independent Dalit woman who faces abuse at the hands of her upper-caste in-laws, the novel exposes the persistence of caste-based patriarchal subjugation of Dalit women across class positions. This paper argues that Deshpande's narrative articulates the intersectional nature of caste and gender oppression, illustrating how Dalit women's bodies become sites of contestation where caste hierarchy and patriarchal power are violently inscribed.

Keywords: Caste Hierarchy, Caste Patriarchy, Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Everyday Casteism

Introduction

Recent debates over the new University Grants Commission's Equity Regulations have once again brought the question of caste inequality into the spotlight. The proposed regulations, aimed at eliminating caste discrimination in higher educational institutions, have launched fierce debates on all public platforms and protests on campuses across the nation. While critics argue that the regulations are ambiguous and could be misused, supporters contend that they are essential to address entrenched caste discrimination in the realm of higher education. The controversy highlights the continuing relevance of caste in contemporary India and reveals how questions of privilege, merit, and social justice remain deeply contested.

Caste hierarchies in Indian society are being dynamically reshaped in modern times. These inequalities have become deeply embedded within all aspects of contemporary life, public and private. Despite the constitutional guarantee of equality, caste continues to regulate social relations and day-to-day interactions, often determining access to opportunities and resources. The pervasive nature of caste makes it increasingly difficult to resist its hegemony. Recent studies by scholars such as M.N. Shrinivas, Sundar Sarukkai, Gopal Guru, Suraj Yengde, and others have consistently highlighted the influence of caste in powerful secular institutions, including higher education, government bodies, and even the corporate sector. These institutions sometimes facilitate the systematic exclusion of Dalits, women, Adivasis, and minorities. This exclusion is often justified through the persuasive discourse of merit, efficiency, and performance – ideas constructed and disseminated from positions of power and privilege.

Yengde (2019) [11], in his seminal text *Caste Matters*, observes that in contemporary discussions, caste is primarily viewed as a Dalit-related issue. Caste is associated with sufferers, for whom affirmative action is taken. However, it is pointed out that caste is also about inherited privilege enjoyed by the dominant castes, which is seldom acknowledged. Despite the overwhelmingly large number of atrocities and incidents of discrimination against the Dalits, there is a plain denial and unashamed conviction that caste does not matter in present times.

Dalit groups have resisted the oppressive caste system through various means, including revolutionary movements, demands for constitutional reforms, artistic creations, and political representation. Among these forms of resistance, literature has emerged as one of the most powerful mediums for articulating the pain, suffering, and marginalized voices of the Dalit communities. Dalit writers, through their writings in various languages, have played a crucial role in reclaiming agency for their communities, using literature as a tool of resistance to challenge dominant narratives and assert their identities. At the same time, representation of Dalit issues has not been limited to Dalit writers alone. Several non-Dalit writers have also attempted to interrogate caste oppression and social inequality through their writings.

While Dalit men remain vulnerable within the hierarchical caste structure, the situation of Dalit women is even more precarious, as they occupy the most marginalized position at the intersection of caste, class, and patriarchal oppression. Dalit women experience rampant caste discrimination, economic exploitation, sexual violence, and denial of access to financial and institutional resources. Scholars of Dalit Feminism have emphasized the layered oppression of Dalit women. As Lanjewar (1995) [7] posits, Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over insofar as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression.

Dalit writers and scholars have highlighted the limitations of the Dalit Movement, Feminism, and the Left Movement in effectively addressing the specific concerns of Dalit women. Guru (1995) [6], in his essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently," argues that Dalit women must articulate their own experiences and organize themselves on their own terms, as their specific experiences of subjection have been overlooked by both the mainstream feminist movement and the male-dominated Dalit movement. It is further stated that Dalit women's need to talk differently emerges from external and internal factors. The external factors are constituted by the non-Dalit forces, the Left, and the State, which fail to acknowledge the specificity of Dalit women's experience. Internal factors, on the other hand, refer to patriarchal domination within the Dalit communities, manifested in the form of political marginalization and erasure of women's voices in the literary and activist fields. Dalit men reproduce the same mechanisms of domination against Dalit women as upper-caste men use against them.

In recent years, a significant rise in the visibility of Dalit women in literary representations has been witnessed, driven by a surge in autobiographies and other literary works authored by Dalit women themselves and some socially conscious and sensitive non-Dalit authors. The complex experiences and layered marginalization of Dalit women are powerfully reflected in literary narratives that expose the lived realities of caste and gender violence.

Analysis of Anjali Deshpande's Nobody Lights a Candle

Anjali Deshpande's English translation of her Hindi novella *Hatya* (2019), retitled *Nobody Lights a Candle* (2024) [5], is a scathing indictment of entrenched caste hierarchies and deep-seated misogyny within Indian society. The novella foregrounds the lived experiences of the downtrodden communities, particularly the Dalit women, in a rigid caste-class-stratified social order. The author depicts the oppression, degeneration, and dehumanization of Dalit women resulting from lower caste status, poverty, economic disparity, and gender.

The narrative unfolds through the perspective of Adhirath, a suspended police officer from Delhi, who becomes informally involved in the investigation of the murder of a young Dalit girl at a farmhouse in a nearby village. Although he is not officially assigned to the case, he is drawn into the investigation by a personal search for purpose and by his growing intrigue with the mystery and notoriety surrounding the victim.

The villagers and authorities exhibit profound indifference and apathy toward Suryabala, the murder victim, seeing her death as nothing more than an unnecessary inconvenience. Her mother is the only one who mourns for the poor woman. Still, even she is unable to overcome deeply ingrained social prejudices and ultimately blames Suryabala for her brutal death. In a moment that reveals her internalized patriarchy and social stigma, she declares that Suryabala definitely met the fate she deserved and died the way she lived, filthy. Adhirath learns that her name was Suryabala, though she was known by different names to different people. She is perceived as a disgrace who brought dishonor to her family and community. The villagers speak of her with unmasked disdain and contempt. Even in death, she remains stigmatized for the unconventional life that she chose to lead.

Suryabala was born into a lower-caste family marked by poverty and social marginalization. From an early age, she vehemently resisted the traditional constraints imposed on women in her community. She was married off at the young age of sixteen. She left her abusive husband, boldly defying the patriarchal diktat that women must meekly submit to marital abuse, treating any attempt to walk away as an unacceptable transgression. After her husband's death, she continues to wear bright clothes, further challenging the sartorial restrictions typically imposed on widows.

She becomes a target for the predatory desires of men, for whom she is nothing more than an object of desire. To preserve the family's reputation, her family arranges a second marriage against her will, but she refuses to accept a forced marriage and leaves her second husband shortly. Her mother recounts her family's attempts to violently force her into submission, stating how she ran away in a fortnight, was thrashed by her brothers, locked in a room, and beaten with sticks.

Suryabala accused her husband and his family of physical abuse. Ironically, the caste panchayat imposed a heavy fine on her family before granting a divorce. The horrendous treatment meted out to her by her family members and the caste panchayat highlights the extreme social stigma attached to divorced women, and the relentless pressure on married women to stay in abusive marriages, in the name of culture and honor. The caste court's decision to penalize the woman's family for her so-called transgressions, while

allowing the abusive man to escape unscathed, starkly exposes the deep-rooted patriarchal structure of the community, which imposes different moral standards on men and women. She is mercilessly thrown out of her home by her family and forced to fend for herself.

Seeking to escape the economic and social constraints of village life, she begins working at a beauty parlour in the city and sleeps in the parlour's storeroom. Conscious of her beauty, Suryabala seeks to leverage her body and sexuality to negotiate her precarious social position and achieve a measure of upward mobility.

As Adhirath's unofficial investigation progresses, he discovers startling details about Suryabala. In her desperate bid for financial stability, she befriends Parduman, a driver for a wealthy family. Suryabala introduced herself to Parduman as Basanti. Parduman frequently brought her to the guest house and showered her with expensive gifts. Through Parduman, Suryabala meets Udairaj, the owner of the farmhouse and the only son of a wealthy upper-caste businessman in Delhi. Udairaj is infatuated with Suryabala, and she eventually becomes his mistress.

Even though she continued her relationship with Parduman, her closeness to the Sahib hurt his sense of caste and masculine superiority. Once, he sexually assaulted her to teach her a lesson. Parduman informs Adhirath that Suryabala had wanted to marry Udairaj to elevate her social status. That is why Parduman took her to the Sahib's house so that she knew her place. When Udairaj learned of her visit to his home, he threatened her with severe violence.

The brutality of caste patriarchy reaches its peak when Suryabala becomes pregnant. Fearing social scandal, Udairaj orders Parduman to eliminate her. Parduman recounts the harrowing events that unfolded on the night of the murder. The sarpanch and the Pradhan, who had previously made advances toward Suryabala, forcefully entered the farmhouse without warning. Seizing the opportunity, they brutally raped her without fear of the consequences. Parduman also sexually assaulted her, claiming he intended to "teach her a lesson." Following this, Udairaj arrived at the farmhouse and strangled Suryabala with her dupatta. In a horrifying display of brutality, Udairaj not only choked her but also ordered Parduman to dismember her body.

This structural impunity can also be understood through Welchman and Hossain's (2006) [10] and Rao's analysis of the sexual economy of caste. The caste system operates through a sexual economy that dictates who can have sexual or marital relationships with whom. The caste system forbids marriage across caste lines to maintain caste purity. However, it is a deeply uneven system at its core. It mandates that the upper-caste women must be strictly protected to maintain caste purity, while the Dalit women are often treated as sexually accessible to upper-caste men. Thus, caste simultaneously controls sexuality through endogamous marriage and permits sexual exploitation of lower-caste women.

After confessing to the murder, Udairaj arrogantly tells Adhirath that she simply did not know where she belonged, remarking that no matter how pretty a sandal is, nobody turns it into a necklace. Dalit women's bodies are sexually accessible but not socially acceptable. The statement exposes the veneer of respectability that conceals the deep-rooted misogyny and arrogance prevalent among the privileged. It is a cold assertion that caste boundaries must remain intact. It reflects the deep-seated belief among upper-caste-class men that people born in downtrodden communities must remain confined to their prescribed social positions. Suryabala's attempt to challenge the carefully constructed social norms is seen as a dangerous transgression. Within this social framework, violence serves as a weapon of social control. The brutal murder becomes a form of exemplary punishment for women like Suryabala who dare defy the social codes. The violence is thus intended to reassert caste and class hierarchies over the bodies of women.

Through the tragic fate of Suryabala, *Nobody Lights a Candle* exposes how sexual violence operates as a structural mechanism of caste patriarchy to discipline women who challenge social boundaries and sustain the dominance of privileged caste–class groups.

Despite the viciousness of the crime, caste and class privilege ensure that Udairaj and the Pradhan escape punishment, while Parduman, a lowly driver, is arrested and made the scapegoat. The events surrounding Suryabala's murder thus disclose the structural inequalities embedded within the caste system. Chakravarthi (2002) [3] draws attention to the close relationship between caste and class in contemporary India. In many rural contexts, social dominance is determined by the combined influence of caste status, land ownership, and access to political authority. These factors grant dominant castes considerable social power, enabling them to maintain control over the landless poor Dalits. Through this intersection of caste and economic privilege, dominant groups are often able to control the institutions and mechanisms of the state.

Despite processes of globalization and modernization, the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, have not significantly improved. Instead, the concentration of economic resources and political power in the hands of already privileged caste groups has further widened existing inequalities in modern India (Navayan, 2015) [8].

The social dominance of upper-caste groups is further consolidated by their strong presence in senior bureaucratic and police positions. Occupying such influential roles enables them to utilize the institutional power of the state in ways that protect and reinforce their caste and class interests. Dalit women, such as Suryabala, are the worst victims of the entrenched caste-class nexus, with their bodies becoming the battleground upon which dominant caste and class groups assert their power. As Bindu (2014) [2] argues, Dalit women's bodies have been understood to be sites of extreme violence and violations. Her body is uniquely vulnerable, serving as a painful site of degradation both for her as an individual and for her community. Distinct forms of debasement characterize the violations of the Dalit woman's body.

As Adhirath points out, if some people light candles at India Gate, perhaps then justice can be achieved, but nobody lights a candle for the poor at India Gate. Adhirath's remark is a stark reminder of the politics of public mourning in contemporary India. In recent times, candlelight vigils, following widely publicized incidents of violence, have become symbolic expressions of collective grief and demands for justice. However, such mobilizations tend to emerge primarily when the victims belong to socially visible and relatively privileged sections of society. The suffering of marginalized communities, particularly Dalit women, rarely evokes the same level of national outrage or media attention.

Within this context, the title of Deshpande's novella becomes deeply ironic and symbolic. The phrase *Nobody Lights a Candle* underscores the silence and indifference that surround the suffering of marginalized communities. Suryabala's death does not become a national tragedy; it remains an invisible crime buried within the structures of caste patriarchy and institutional complicity. By foregrounding this silence, the narrative exposes the stark disparities in whose lives are considered worthy of public grief and justice.

The novella further exposes the persistence of caste stigma through Adhirath's wife, Pushpa's, experience in his conservative household, where caste-based patriarchy operates through everyday humiliation and reinforces the entrenched structures of social subordination. Pushpa is a police officer from a lower caste, and faces relentless abuse from her parents-in-law, staunch believers in endogamous marriage practices and caste stratification. Adhirath's family belongs to the Jatav community, a Dalit caste, yet his parents display a sense of superiority over Pushpa, who comes from the Bhangi caste—a group traditionally

associated with cleaning jobs and considered untouchable in the caste hierarchy. This attitude towards their lower-caste daughter-in-law highlights a paradox among upwardly mobile Dalits who perpetuate discrimination within their own ranks, mirroring the upper castes. The untouchables very often try to replicate within their very own varied ranks the hierarchies of the caste system of which they are at the receiving end (Basu, 2002) [1]. The episode, therefore, reveals how the logic of caste hierarchy can be internalized even by those who are themselves victims of its oppression.

This episode also highlights the central role of endogamy in sustaining caste boundaries. According to Chakravarti (2002) [3], each jati functions as a bounded social unit that must reproduce itself through controlled marital practices. Endogamous marriage becomes the principal mechanism through which caste boundaries are maintained and transmitted across generations. Chakravarti argues that the preservation of caste has historically depended upon regulating women's sexuality and reproductive capacity to protect land, women, and ritual quality within the caste group. Within such a framework, inter-caste marriage is perceived as a serious threat to the stability of the caste hierarchy.

The resentment that Adhirath's parents harbour towards Pushpa, therefore, stems not merely from personal prejudice but from a deeply embedded social logic that seeks to preserve caste purity through marital control. Adhirath's father asserts her lower-caste background with extreme prejudice, referencing manual scavenging and expressing disdain at the thought of social equality within the home. The statement not only exposes the deep-seated stigma attached to occupations associated with manual scavenging but also reveals how notions of purity and pollution continue to shape social attitudes even among communities positioned within the broader category of Dalits. Through this portrayal, the novella demonstrates that caste hierarchy operates through a complex system of graded inequalities, reproducing divisions even within marginalized groups.

Pushpa and Adhirath are part of the emerging Dalit middle class, a demographic that has benefitted from reservation policies, increased access to education, globalization, and a growing socio-political consciousness among Dalit communities. However, their improved economic status and limited political representation do not shield them from the everyday casteism ingrained in a bureaucratic system dominated by upper-caste interests (Ramani, 2024) [9]. For Pushpa, this oppression is compounded; she faces discrimination not only as a Dalit but also as a woman, reflecting the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression (IDSN, 2013) [4]. The relentless abuse that Pushpa endures highlights the limitations of the law in dismantling deep-rooted caste-based patriarchy. The text subverts the commonly held assumption that education and career liberate women from the clutches of caste and gender oppression. For Dalit women, education and financial independence do not guarantee emancipation; instead, they continue to navigate a complex social order that disregards them on multiple fronts.

The parallel narratives of Suryabala and Pushpa unravel within contrasting yet interrelated frameworks of alleged prostitution and enforced domestication, respectively. While Suryabala, who is labeled as a parlour-girl, pross, and Amirpurwali, suffers physical violation and meets a gruesome end, Pushpa, derogatorily referred to as a havaldarni by her in-laws, endures severe psychological distress and humiliation in her marital home. The text effectively portrays the intricate interplay between caste and gender, thereby unveiling the intense prejudice confronted by Dalit women. Moreover, these writings offer a critical reflection on the idea of modernity in India, revealing that, despite claims of progress, the caste system continues to dictate individual lives. The paper explores the multifaceted narratives of caste-based subjugation, opposition, and identity construction within the Indian societal fabric. The study is situated within the substantial corpus of Dalit literature, which has ascended as a potent medium for articulating

the experiences of India's disenfranchised communities, aiming to erase the entrenched dominance of caste and gender hierarchies.

Conclusion

Anjali Deshpande's *Nobody Lights a Candle* vividly illustrates the continuing hold of caste and gender-based oppression within contemporary Indian society. Through the tragic and realistic tales of Suryabala and Pushpa, Deshpande exposes the layers of subjugation that Dalit women endure, irrespective of status, education, and financial independence. Suryabala's tragic end and Pushpa's relentless psychological torment underscore a grim reality: despite shallow modernity and socioeconomic progress, the vestiges of the caste system continue to repress Dalit women. This paper emphasizes the urgent need to confront and dismantle these deeply internalized hierarchies that shape women's lives and perpetuate inequality. By giving voice to the silenced women and challenging dominant narratives, Dalit literature emerges as a powerful vehicle for resistance and social change. As India navigates its complex socio-cultural landscape, the stories of Dalit women such as Suryabala and Pushpa remind us of the continuing struggle for justice and equality, calling for a radical revaluation of modernity and endeavoring for true liberation from the chains of caste and patriarchy.

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