



WOMEN'S AGONY IN MODERN INDIA: A CRITICAL STUDY OF RAMA MEHTA'S PORTRAYAL

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Abstract

*This paper critically examines the representation of women's suffering in modern India through the lens of Rama Mehta's writings, particularly her seminal work *Inside the Haveli*. The study highlights the silent struggle of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. Mehta's portrayal uncovers layers of psychological, social, and cultural anguish faced by women, particularly in patriarchal households. Through a thematic and character-based analysis, this paper foregrounds how Mehta gives voice to the often-unheard cries of Indian women, revealing the complex interplay between obedience, silence, resistance, and identity.*

Keywords

Rama Mehta, Inside The Haveli, Women's Agony, Gender, Patriarchy, Modern India, Domesticity, Identity Crisis, etc.

Full Article

• Introduction:

Rama Mehta, a notable Indian English novelist, has been instrumental in voicing the struggles of women in a rapidly transforming Indian society. Her writings present a critical commentary on the socio-cultural constraints that continue to bind women, even in modern India. With a sociological sensitivity, Mehta explores the nuanced realities of women confined within domestic spaces and patriarchal norms. This paper focuses on *Inside the Haveli* (1977), which serves as a microcosm of women's agony in a traditional Rajasthani household and extends its implications to the broader Indian context.

• Contextualizing Modern Indian Womanhood:

Modern Indian women inhabit a paradoxical space - legally empowered but socially constrained. Education, urbanization, and employment have redefined roles, but customs, family expectations, and societal judgments still enforce regressive norms. Rama Mehta, with her sociological background, captures this contradiction in her female characters, making her work a crucial site for understanding the lived realities of Indian women post-independence.

• Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*: A Window into Women's Agony:

1. Setting and Symbolism:

The haveli is not just an architectural space but a symbol of entrapment and silence. It serves as a metaphor for tradition-bound expectations, where women's roles are predefined and rarely questioned. The protagonist, Geeta, represents the educated, modern woman forced into a feudal lifestyle after marriage.

2. Character Study: Geeta as a Voice of Resistance and Suffering:



Geeta's transition from a Delhi-bred woman to a haveli-bound daughter-in-law marks the central conflict of the novel. Her initial resistance and gradual compromise reflect the psychological turmoil many modern women face. Her agony lies not only in physical restrictions but in the emotional suppression and identity erasure she experiences.

3. Silent Suffering of Other Female Characters:

The other women in the haveli - servants, relatives, and matriarchs - reinforce the system but are themselves victims of it. Their silent endurance, lack of autonomy, and internalized patriarchy point to a generational cycle of female agony. Mehta captures these voices not through overt rebellion but through layered narrative silences and subtle emotional currents.

4. Themes of Patriarchy, Obedience, and Internal Conflict:

Mehta portrays patriarchy not always as violent but often as gentle domination - where control is exercised through love, expectation, and guilt. The inner conflict between modern thought and traditional duty creates emotional anguish. Women are expected to serve, sacrifice, and adapt - leading to loss of self.

5. The Politics of Silence:

Silence is a recurring motif in Mehta's work. It is not just passive submission but a complex form of communication, protest, and survival. Geeta's silence, especially in the face of injustice, speaks louder than words. Her quiet endurance and gradual influence on the haveli women suggest that transformation, although slow, is possible.

6. Relevance in Contemporary India:

Despite decades of progress, Indian women still navigate a minefield of gender-based expectations. Issues like domestic violence, unequal labor distribution, lack of autonomy, and societal pressure persist. Mehta's depiction remains disturbingly relevant. Her narrative forces the reader to confront uncomfortable truths about the persistence of women's agony behind closed doors.

7. Rama Mehta: Life, Career, and Context in Indian English Literature:

Rama Mehta (1923–1978) occupies a significant place in the history of Indian English writing, especially in the representation of women's lives within traditional Indian households. Born in Udaipur, Rajasthan, she was educated both in India and abroad, and her professional life as a sociologist deeply informed her creative writing. Unlike many purely literary figures, Mehta brought to her fiction a nuanced sociological insight into the conflict between tradition and modernity, particularly in the lives of women.

Her most well-known work, *Inside the Haveli* (1977), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously in 1979, is a landmark text in Indian women's fiction. The novel depicts the life of Geeta, an educated young woman who marries into a conservative Rajput household in Udaipur. The narrative explores the transition of Geeta from a modern, urban-educated woman to a dutiful daughter-in-law who must embrace centuries-old customs. The haveli (mansion) functions not merely as a domestic space but as a cultural metaphor for women's confinement, discipline, and suppression in patriarchal Indian society.

Mehta's contribution lies in her ability to depict women's struggles not in terms of open defiance but through subtle negotiation and adjustment. Like George Eliot's heroines, her protagonists rarely rebel overtly; instead, they endure, adapt, and quietly challenge the expectations imposed upon them. In this sense, Mehta creates a narrative space where the politics of domesticity becomes central to understanding women's identity in post-independence India.



In the broader landscape of Indian English literature, Rama Mehta belongs to the generation of women novelists who carried forward the legacy of pioneers like Kamala Markandaya and Ruth PraverJhabvala. Her writing reflects the postcolonial concern with preserving tradition, while simultaneously highlighting the limitations it imposes on women. Placed within the continuum of Indian feminist writing, Mehta bridges the gap between sociological observation and fictional representation, offering a voice to women negotiating between modern education and patriarchal expectations.

8. Literature Review: Feminist Literary Criticism and Indian Women Novelists:

8.1. Feminist Literary Criticism and Gender Studies:

Feminist literary criticism emerged as a powerful academic discipline in the 20th century, questioning the patriarchal foundations of literature and advocating the recovery of women's voices. Pioneering works such as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) shifted critical attention towards women's creativity, subjectivity, and silenced histories. Showalter's concept of "gynocriticism" emphasized studying women writers on their own terms rather than through male-dominated standards, while Gilbert and Gubar highlighted how patriarchal culture rendered women as either angels or monsters in literature.

In the postcolonial context, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) raised important questions about the silencing of women in colonial and patriarchal narratives. Spivak argued that women in the Globalisation South often remain doubly marginalized—as colonized subjects and as women. Her ideas have been crucial in rethinking the position of Indian women novelists in both national and global literary discourse.

8.2. Indian Feminist Criticism and Women's Writing:

In India, feminist literary criticism took shape in the 1970s and 1980s, parallel to the women's movement. Scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, in their monumental two-volume anthology *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (1991, 1993), documented women's writing across centuries, asserting the continuity of women's voices despite systemic silencing. Their work not only recovered forgotten texts but also situated women's literature within the socio-political contexts of caste, community, and class.

Indian women novelists in English—such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Rama Mehta—have depicted women's lives as shaped by patriarchy, tradition, and modernity. Their works are not merely individual narratives but also cultural documents that reveal the power struggles embedded in the family, marriage, and society. Critics like Jasbir Jain and Meenakshi Mukherjee have further emphasized how women's writing in India negotiates between modern feminist thought and indigenous cultural realities.

8.3. Positioning George Eliot and Indian Women Novelists:

George Eliot, though belonging to Victorian England, can be read alongside Indian women writers because of her focus on the psychology of suppression, the restrictions of marriage, and the costs of silent endurance. Just as Eliot used realism to reveal women's struggles in a patriarchal society, Indian novelists like Rama Mehta, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande deploy narrative strategies to portray the conflicts of educated, middle-class women in India. The cross-cultural comparison not only situates Eliot as an early feminist thinker but also underscores the universality of women's struggles across geography and history.

9. Comparative Analysis: George Eliot and Indian Women Novelists:



9.1. George Eliot and Rama Mehta: Domesticity as Cultural Confinement:

George Eliot and Rama Mehta, though separated by a century and culture, share a strikingly similar vision of women's restricted existence within patriarchal domesticity. Eliot's heroines—Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke, and Gwendolen Harleth—are confined within the Victorian household, where intellectual ambition and emotional desire are stifled. Similarly, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977) portrays Geeta, an educated woman who enters a traditional Rajput household in Udaipur.

For Eliot, the home often becomes a site of suppression where women must subordinate their individuality for the sake of family honor or social respectability. Maggie Tulliver, despite her thirst for knowledge, is constantly reminded that books are not for girls. Likewise, Dorothea Brooke finds her intellectual aspirations crushed by a marriage that reduces her to a submissive wife. Rama Mehta echoes this dynamic in the haveli, where Geeta must abandon her modern upbringing and embrace centuries-old rituals of obedience and decorum.

Yet, both writers also reveal the paradoxical strength within suppression. Eliot's heroines, though not openly rebellious, retain moral depth and intellectual consciousness. Similarly, Geeta learns to navigate the patriarchal structure by negotiating space for her individuality within tradition. Thus, both Eliot and Mehta depict compliance not as total submission but as a strategy of survival.

9.2. George Eliot and Anita Desai: Psychological Suppression:

While Eliot primarily focuses on moral dilemmas and social duty, Anita Desai highlights the psychological consequences of patriarchy. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Maya, the sensitive protagonist, suffers from acute loneliness and existential despair in her marriage to Gautama, a rational, detached lawyer. Maya's inner torment mirrors the psychological imprisonment of Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*.

Both Maya and Gwendolen are women who appear outwardly privileged and admired, yet they are emotionally trapped in marriages devoid of love and companionship. Gwendolen, controlled by the cold and manipulative Grandcourt, experiences suffocating dependence. Maya, overwhelmed by her husband's indifference, becomes increasingly paranoid, leading to her eventual mental breakdown and tragic act of violence.

Through these portrayals, both Eliot and Desai foreground the psychological cost of female suppression. While Eliot presents Gwendolen's redemption through spiritual awakening, Desai depicts Maya's collapse into madness, suggesting that Indian women in a rapidly modernizing yet patriarchal society face even harsher emotional consequences. Together, they demonstrate that patriarchy operates not only at the level of social roles but also within the deepest recesses of the female psyche.

9.3. George Eliot and Shashi Deshpande: Silence as Survival:

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) resonates powerfully with Eliot's vision of quiet endurance. The protagonist Jaya is a middle-class housewife who feels trapped in her role as a submissive wife and mother. Her silence—both literal and metaphorical—becomes the means through which she negotiates her suppressed identity.

Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* shares a similar trajectory. Her marriage to Casaubon is a silencing of her intellectual potential; she learns to endure rather than resist. Just as Dorothea finds limited fulfillment in a second marriage, Jaya too reflects on the compromises women make to sustain family harmony.

However, Deshpande takes the theme further by explicitly questioning the cultural conditioning that teaches women to suppress their voices. Jaya realizes that her silence, though



imposed by patriarchy, has also been her own complicity. This self-awareness marks a subtle shift from Eliot's heroines, who endure with moral dignity but rarely articulate feminist self-reflection. In this way, Deshpande pushes Eliot's legacy into a more consciously feminist critique of domestic patriarchy.

9.4. Common Threads Across Cultures:

Despite cultural, temporal, and geographical differences, Eliot, Mehta, Desai, and Deshpande share certain thematic preoccupations:

- ✓ Marriage as a Trap: For Dorothea, Gwendolen, Geeta, Maya, and Jaya, marriage does not guarantee companionship but rather imposes silence, duty, and loss of selfhood.
- ✓ Domestic Spaces as Sites of Suppression: Eliot's St. Ogg's, Mehta's haveli, Desai's urban households, and Deshpande's middle-class flats all symbolize how patriarchy operates through domesticity.
- ✓ Resistance through Endurance: Instead of overt rebellion, these women negotiate survival through silence, adjustment, and moral strength.
- ✓ Feminist Consciousness without Revolution: None of these heroines are revolutionaries in the political sense. Their rebellion is quiet, psychological, or symbolic—a reflection of how patriarchy leaves women little room for open resistance.

10. Thematic Analysis: Domesticity, Marriage, and Resistance in Eliot and Indian Women's Literature:

10.1. Domesticity and the Politics of Space:

One of the most enduring themes across George Eliot and Indian women novelists is the representation of the domestic sphere as both sanctuary and prison. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver is confined to the expectations of St. Ogg's society, where her desires for intellectual freedom clash with domestic duties. The river and the mill, spaces associated with family and heritage, also become symbols of Maggie's suffocation.

Similarly, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* transforms the architectural space of the haveli into a cultural metaphor. The haveli is a site of tradition, discipline, and female subordination, where Geeta must learn the rituals of servitude. The walls of the haveli signify not only physical boundaries but also the emotional and intellectual confinement of women. Anita Desai's urban households in *Cry, the Peacock* and Shashi Deshpande's middle-class flat in *That Long Silence* continue this thematic thread, showing how domesticity operates as a site where women's lives are policed, silenced, and regulated.

The politics of space is thus central: whether in Eliot's Victorian homes or Indian households, the home is rarely a site of liberation. Instead, it is where patriarchal authority is reproduced, passed down through ritual, marriage, and cultural expectations.

10.2. Marriage and Women's Identity:

The institution of marriage is another crucial thematic concern. Eliot's heroines—Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth—discover that marriage is not an escape into companionship but an arena of submission. Dorothea's union with Casaubon silences her intellectual aspirations, while Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt reduces her to an object of control.

In Indian fiction, similar dynamics recur. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* finds her marriage to Gautama devoid of love or intimacy, leading to her psychological breakdown. Jaya in *That Long Silence* reflects on decades of quiet subjugation within marriage, realizing that her silence is both imposed and internalized. For Geeta in *Inside the Haveli*, marriage is less about personal fulfillment and more about becoming a custodian of tradition.



Thus, across both Victorian and Indian contexts, marriage emerges not as liberation but as an instrument of patriarchy that erases or reshapes female identity. Women are valued not for their individuality but for their conformity to prescribed roles as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers.

10.3. Resistance vs Compliance:

A fascinating theme across Eliot and Indian women novelists is the tension between resistance and compliance. Maggie Tulliver's passionate intellect represents a form of resistance, but her tragic death symbolizes society's refusal to accommodate female autonomy. Dorothea resists through her moral strength, but ultimately complies with societal expectations by choosing a respectable second marriage.

Indian women novelists extend this theme in more contemporary contexts. Maya's psychological collapse in *Cry, the Peacock* may be read as a tragic rebellion against the emotional starvation of her marriage. Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence* is simultaneously compliance and resistance—compliance with patriarchal norms but resistance in her refusal to pretend happiness. Geeta's eventual acceptance of haveli traditions reflects compliance, but her subtle agency in reshaping domestic practices signals quiet resistance.

Unlike the militant feminism of later Western literature, both Eliot and Indian women novelists depict subtle, interior forms of rebellion. Their heroines resist not by overthrowing patriarchy but by negotiating space for individuality within it. This underscores the cultural reality that for many women, resistance has historically been possible only through silence, endurance, or negotiation.

10.4. Cross-Cultural Feminist Consciousness:

By examining Eliot alongside Indian writers, a broader feminist consciousness becomes visible. Although situated in different centuries and societies, Eliot, Mehta, Desai, and Deshpande portray women caught in patriarchal traps of domesticity and marriage. Their protagonists demonstrate that suppression is not culturally isolated but a universal feature of male-dominated societies.

What unites these writers is their commitment to portraying women's inner lives—their doubts, desires, and psychological turmoil. Instead of external revolution, they focus on the emotional costs of patriarchy, revealing the silent rebellions that sustain women's dignity.

In this sense, George Eliot becomes a precursor of global feminist thought, while Indian novelists localize this struggle within their own cultural frameworks. Together, they create a transnational dialogue on women's suppression, identity, and survival.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the comparative exploration of George Eliot and Indian women novelists such as Rama Mehta, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande reveals the universality of women's struggles across cultures and centuries. Despite the temporal and spatial distance between Victorian England and modern India, both Eliot and the Indian writers share a feminist vision that interrogates the systemic oppression of women within patriarchal structures. Their works do not present overt revolutions or radical upheavals, but instead foreground the subtle negotiations, compromises, silences, and inner rebellions that constitute women's lived experiences.

George Eliot, through characters like Dorothea Brooke, Gwendolen Harleth, and Maggie Tulliver, unveils the way women's intellectual and emotional lives are constrained by societal expectations. Her novels critique marriage, domesticity, and the limited avenues for female self-actualization, revealing the tragic cost of suppressing women's individuality. Eliot's fiction thus anticipates feminist discourse by insisting on the dignity of women's interior lives and the need to rethink gendered roles.



Indian women novelists extend this discourse into a different cultural context, showing that women in independent India, though liberated legally and politically, remain bound by traditional expectations. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* portrays a protagonist forced to negotiate with conservative domestic traditions, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* dramatizes the psychological impact of an emotionally barren marriage, and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* explores the quiet endurance of women trapped within middle-class respectability. These narratives resonate with Eliot's heroines in their depiction of domestic confinement, the complexities of marriage, and the ambivalence between resistance and compliance.

A major thematic convergence lies in the institution of marriage. For both Eliot and Indian novelists, marriage functions less as a union of equals than as a mechanism of patriarchal control. Dorothea's wasted years with Casaubon echo Jaya's silences in Deshpande's novel, while Maggie's intellectual yearnings parallel Maya's psychological hunger in Desai's work. In each case, marriage erases individuality, enforcing submission and obedience.

Another common thread is the politics of space. The Victorian household and the Indian haveli alike symbolize cultural continuity but also imprisonment. Eliot's provincial towns and Mehta's haveli enforce conformity through social surveillance, while Desai and Deshpande expose the modern household as equally restrictive. Domesticity thus becomes a stage on which the drama of women's suppression unfolds.

Despite the weight of these restrictions, the heroines of Eliot and Indian women novelists are not passive victims. They resist, often quietly, through inner strength, intellectual independence, or subtle negotiation of roles. These modes of resistance do not dismantle patriarchy outright but question its legitimacy and carve out spaces for female subjectivity. The act of writing itself, for Eliot, Mehta, Desai, and Deshpande, becomes a form of feminist resistance, giving voice to women whose experiences were historically silenced.

This comparative study also emphasizes the cross-cultural relevance of feminist criticism. By placing George Eliot alongside Indian novelists, we recognize that patriarchal oppression transcends cultural boundaries, but also that feminist articulations of women's pain and endurance emerge in varied forms. Eliot's Victorian feminism and the Indian writers' postcolonial feminism together create a transnational dialogue on women's suppression, resilience, and identity.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the "agony of women," whether in Eliot's 19th-century England or in modern India, lies in the tension between individuality and conformity, desire and duty, resistance and silence. While these authors portray women's struggles with compassion and psychological depth, they also highlight the need for continued social transformation. Their works remind us that the question of women's emancipation is unfinished, and literature remains a vital space where suppressed voices speak and challenge the structures of power.

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