



Women, Patriarchy, and Identity in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The representation of women and their struggle for identity has occupied a central position in Indian English literature. Women writers have consistently explored the experiences of women living within patriarchal social structures and have highlighted their efforts to negotiate autonomy and selfhood. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* is one such significant work that offers a realistic portrayal of women's lives in a traditional Rajput household. The novel presents the experiences of Geeta, an educated and modern woman who enters a conservative aristocratic family after marriage and encounters rigid social customs and patriarchal expectations. The present review article examines existing scholarly studies on the themes of women, patriarchy, and identity in the novel. The study investigates how patriarchal institutions influence women's lives and shape their identities within the enclosed space of the haveli. It also analyses Geeta's journey from alienation and conflict to adaptation and self-realization. The review reveals that Mehta does not depict women merely as victims of oppression; instead, she portrays them as individuals capable of negotiation, resilience, and transformation. The article concludes that *Inside the Haveli* remains a valuable feminist text because it foregrounds women's quest for identity and dignity while simultaneously exposing the limitations imposed by patriarchal society.

Keywords: Women, patriarchy, identity, feminism, selfhood, Rama Mehta, Indian English literature.

Introduction

Indian English literature has increasingly become a platform through which women writers articulate the realities of women's lives and challenge long-established social conventions. During the twentieth century, numerous women novelists brought issues such as gender inequality, marginalization, identity crisis, and female autonomy to the forefront of literary discourse. Their writings not only document women's experiences but also question the patriarchal structures that regulate their existence (Beauvoir, 2011).

Among these writers, Rama Mehta occupies an important position because of her sociological understanding of Indian society and her sensitive portrayal of women's lives. Her novels depict the complexities of social relationships, cultural traditions, and gender roles operating within Indian society. *Inside the Haveli* is regarded as one of her most remarkable works because it provides a realistic account of women's experiences within a conservative aristocratic household.

Published in 1977, the novel narrates the story of Geeta, a well-educated young woman raised in the urban environment of Mumbai. After her marriage to Ajay Singh, Geeta enters the ancestral haveli of her husband's family in Udaipur. The transition from a modern metropolitan setting to a traditional Rajput household compels her to confront unfamiliar customs, social expectations, and restrictive gender norms. The haveli functions as a highly structured social institution where women's movements, interactions, and behaviour are governed by strict conventions (Mehta, 1977).

Initially, Geeta experiences a profound sense of displacement and isolation because the values she had embraced in her parental home differ considerably from those prevailing within the haveli. However, as the narrative progresses, she gradually learns to negotiate between modernity and tradition. Her experiences illustrate the difficulties encountered by many Indian women who attempt to reconcile personal aspirations with social obligations.

The novel also examines how patriarchal authority operates through cultural practices and family traditions. Customs such as purdah, domestic confinement, and gender segregation reinforce women's subordinate position within the family structure. At the same time, Mehta portrays women as active participants in shaping their lives, thereby challenging simplistic notions of female passivity (Shukla & Pradhan, 2021).

The present review article analyses existing scholarship on *Inside the Haveli* with particular emphasis on the interconnected themes of women, patriarchy, and identity.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the portrayal of women in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*.
- To analyse the functioning of patriarchy within the social structure of the Haveli.
- To investigate the process of identity formation in the character of Geeta.
- To review scholarly perspectives concerning women and patriarchy in the novel.
- To evaluate the contribution of *Inside the Haveli* to feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

Theoretical Framework

This review is informed by feminist literary criticism, which provides a useful framework for examining the relationship between gender, power, and identity in literary texts. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* presents the experiences of women living within a traditional Rajput household, where social customs and patriarchal values shape their roles, choices, and identities. To understand these complexities, the study draws upon the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Sylvia Walby, Judith Butler, and Deniz Kandiyoti.

Simone de Beauvoir's ideas highlight that women's identities are largely shaped by social expectations rather than by their own independent choices. This perspective is reflected in Geeta's life, as she adjusts to the customs of the haveli while attempting to preserve her individuality. Her experiences illustrate the tension between personal aspirations and culturally prescribed gender roles.

Kate Millett's understanding of patriarchy explains how unequal power relations are maintained through family and social institutions. In Mehta's novel, patriarchal authority is embedded in everyday practices that define women's responsibilities, behaviour, and position within the household. These structures restrict women's freedom while reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

The study also adopts Sylvia Walby's structural approach to patriarchy, which views gender inequality as the result of interconnected social institutions rather than isolated acts of discrimination. The haveli functions as one such institution, where customs, family traditions, and cultural expectations regulate women's lives and limit their access to autonomy and decision-making.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further supports this analysis by suggesting that gender identity is continuously shaped through repeated social practices. Geeta's gradual adaptation to the expectations of the haveli demonstrates that identity is neither fixed nor static but evolves through interaction with cultural norms and lived experiences.

In addition, Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the Patriarchal Bargain helps explain the ways women negotiate patriarchal systems. Instead of openly challenging established traditions, women often create limited spaces for agency by working within existing social structures. Geeta's ability to balance respect for tradition with her desire for gradual change reflects this process of negotiation.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the representation of women, patriarchy, and identity in *Inside the Haveli*. They enable the present review to explore not only the constraints imposed by patriarchal society but also the resilience, adaptability, and evolving identities of women within that social order.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on *Inside the Haveli* has focused on identity, women's agency, patriarchal control, and the cultural negotiation of tradition and modernity.

Chittampalli Radhika and Dr. V. S. V. Laxmi Ramana (2024), in their article "*Navigating Tradition: The Quest for Identity in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli*," examine identity formation through the experiences of Geeta within the restrictive social world of the haveli. The authors argue that identity in the novel is shaped by the complex interaction of gender, family expectations, cultural traditions, and individual consciousness. They demonstrate that Geeta's journey from resistance to gradual acceptance reflects a

process of negotiation rather than passive submission. The study further emphasizes that Rama Mehta portrays identity as dynamic, evolving through adaptation, resilience, and self-awareness instead of open rebellion. By highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity, the article concludes that *Inside the Haveli* remains highly relevant to contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourse, offering valuable insights into women's agency and the search for selfhood within patriarchal social structures.

Similarly, Chansoria, Syed, and Kohli (2024) in “*Locating Women in Inside the Haveli by Rama Mehta*” analyse women’s identity and agency within a traditional Rajput household. The authors highlight customs such as purdah, restrictions on female education, and gender discrimination, while also showing that Geeta maintains her individuality through patience, dignity, and negotiation rather than open rebellion. Their study presents empowerment as gradual and culturally mediated, making it one of the most recent and useful feminist readings of the novel.

Earlier, Bano et al. (2021) in “*A New Phase of Women in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli and the Western Educated Hindu Women*” read Geeta’s movement from Bombay into the conservative haveli as a symbolic encounter between modern education and traditional values. The authors argue that her psychological development reflects cultural negotiation rather than passive submission.

In a similar socio-cultural framework, “*Counterbalancing the Injury and Progress in Tradition: Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli*” by Vishwanath Bite and Sunanda Bose argues that Mehta neither glorifies nor rejects Rajput culture; rather, she presents tradition as capable of gradual transformation through education, self-respect, and women's agency (Bite & Bose, 2021).

The issue of women's marginalization is also central to Krishna Murari Shukla and Prakash Pradhan's study, “*Study of Marginalization of Women in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli (2021)*,” The authors examine how both aristocratic women and female servants experience structural inequality within the patriarchal family system, demonstrating that oppression in the novel transcends class boundaries and affects women across the entire household hierarchy (Shukla & Pradhan, 2021).

A related strand of criticism appears in the work of Bijender Singh (2015), who discusses feminist challenges in the novel and argues that Mehta exposes women's restricted mobility, limited educational opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making. In “*Feminist Reverberations in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli*”, Singh identifies the subtle forms of resistance adopted by female characters against patriarchal control. Together, these studies reinforce the view that Mehta's feminism advocates gradual social reform through resilience, education, and quiet resistance rather than radical confrontation.

Another significant contribution is Usha Kumari Shah's “*Feminist Reading of Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli*”, which examines Geeta's transformation from a modern, educated woman into one who gradually negotiates the patriarchal traditions of the haveli. Shah argues that although Geeta's physical and emotional freedom is restricted by purdah and conservative gender norms, she ultimately asserts her agency through her commitment to her daughter's education and independence. The study interprets Geeta's journey as a search for identity achieved through resilience, adaptation, and subtle resistance rather than direct rebellion.

Dr. Shivani Rushikesh Upadhyay, in “*The Value-orientation of the Marginalized: Women and Servants in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli*”, examines the marginalization of women and domestic servants within the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the haveli. The study argues that Rama Mehta presents an alternative feminist perspective by advocating social reform through moral values, gradual transformation, and cultural continuity rather than open rebellion. Upadhyay contends that although women and servants

experience social oppression, Mehta portrays them as agents of change who challenge unjust traditions while preserving the ethical foundations of Indian society. The article further highlights the novelist's realistic depiction of haveli life, emphasizing that Geeta's journey reflects adaptation, resilience, and the possibility of reform from within the existing social framework (Upadhyay, 2023).

Earlier theoretical and contextual studies remain important for situating *Inside the Haveli* within post-Independence Indian fiction and for interpreting its gendered dynamics. In "*Subdued Voices: Women Characters and Their Author in Inside the Haveli*", S. U. Chavan (2021) examines the novel's portrayal of women's silence and subjugation within a patriarchal social order. Chavan argues that silence functions not merely as passive submission but also as an expression of endurance, resilience, and restrained resistance, while the novel reflects the tension between women's desire for self-assertion and their adherence to traditional social expectations (Chavan, 2021).

"*The Inside View: Native Responses to Contemporary Indian English Novel (2003)*," edited by Rangrao Bhongle, *Inside the Haveli* is discussed as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English fiction. The critical essays in the volume emphasize Rama Mehta's realistic portrayal of Indian domestic life and her sensitive depiction of the tensions between tradition and modernity. The collection highlights the haveli as both a cultural institution and a symbolic space where gender, family hierarchy, and social customs shape women's identities. Bhongle's volume situates the novel within the broader tradition of Indian English literature and recognizes its contribution to discussions of women's agency, cultural continuity, and social transformation.

K. V. Surendran (2002), in "*Women's Writing in India: New Perspectives*," places Rama Mehta among the important women writers who expanded the scope of Indian English literature by foregrounding women's lived experiences within changing social realities. Surendran argues that Mehta's fiction combines sociological insight with literary realism, enabling readers to understand the complex relationship between gender, family, and culture in post-Independence India. His discussion of *Inside the Haveli* highlights the novel's exploration of female identity, domestic space, and patriarchal traditions while acknowledging Mehta's balanced portrayal of cultural change. Surendran concludes that the novel remains an important feminist text because it presents women's empowerment through negotiation, education, and gradual transformation rather than radical resistance.

Critical and reference works also locate Rama Mehta within the larger tradition of *Indian English fiction*. In *Indian Writing in English*, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1985) identifies Mehta as an important post-Independence Indian novelist whose fiction realistically portrays the social and cultural transformations affecting women's lives. By situating Mehta alongside other major Indian English writers, Iyengar demonstrates that *Inside the Haveli* participates in a broader literary engagement with domestic space, cultural transition, and the evolving status of women in modern India.

From a broader feminist perspective, Beauvoir (2011) argues that society constructs women as the "Other" and confines them within predetermined roles. This theoretical framework is highly relevant to *Inside the Haveli*, where women's identities are shaped by social conventions and patriarchal expectations.

Likewise, Millett (1970) identifies patriarchy as a political and cultural system that legitimizes male dominance. The social organization of the haveli clearly reflects such patriarchal structures, as authority is concentrated in male hands while women remain dependent upon familial hierarchies.

Butler (1990) further argues that gender identities are not fixed but are repeatedly produced through social practices and cultural performances. Geeta's gradual adaptation to the customs of the haveli illustrates how gender roles are learned, performed, and negotiated within specific cultural contexts.

Although substantial scholarship exists on women and patriarchy in *Inside the Haveli*, comparatively fewer studies have examined the relationship between patriarchy and identity formation in an integrated manner. Therefore, the present review seeks to synthesize these perspectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel.

Results and Discussion

Women within Patriarchal Structures

The reviewed studies unanimously indicate that patriarchy constitutes the foundational principle governing life inside the haveli. Family traditions, social customs, and hierarchical relationships regulate every aspect of women's existence. Women are expected to remain within domestic spaces, uphold family honour, and demonstrate obedience to established norms (Walby, 1990).

Practices such as purdah symbolize the social control exercised over women. Such customs restrict women's physical mobility and simultaneously reinforce their subordinate status. The literature further reveals that patriarchal ideology is internalized by women themselves, who often become guardians of traditional values.

Geeta's Identity Crisis

Geeta's arrival in the haveli marks the beginning of an intense psychological struggle. Raised in a modern environment, she initially finds the customs of the haveli oppressive and incomprehensible. The abrupt transition from urban freedom to domestic confinement produces feelings of alienation and confusion (Mehta, 1977).

Scholars argue that Geeta's identity crisis arises from the conflict between her previous self and the new social role imposed upon her after marriage (Pratihast, 2020). She is compelled to reassess her beliefs, values, and expectations while adapting to unfamiliar circumstances.

Negotiation as a Strategy of Survival

A significant aspect emerging from the literature is that Mehta does not present rebellion as the only response to patriarchy. Instead, Geeta adopts negotiation as a practical strategy for survival and self-preservation.

Rather than openly challenging the authority of the haveli, she gradually gains acceptance through understanding, patience, and empathy. At the same time, she introduces subtle changes that improve the lives of other women. This approach reflects the complex realities of women's experiences within traditional societies where direct confrontation may not always be possible (Chansoria et al., 2024).

Women's Agency and Resistance

Although women in the novel encounter numerous restrictions, they are not portrayed as passive victims. The reviewed studies demonstrate that women exercise agency in diverse ways. Their resistance often appears in indirect forms such as emotional resilience, solidarity, caregiving, and educational initiatives.

Geeta's efforts to educate Lakshmi and her concern for the welfare of other women indicate her commitment to social change. Education emerges as a powerful means of empowerment because it enables women to challenge inherited inequalities and envision alternative possibilities (Mehta, 1977).

Identity as an Evolving Process

The literature suggests that identity in *Inside the Haveli* should be understood as dynamic rather than fixed. Geeta's experiences reveal that identity continuously evolves through interaction with social, cultural, and personal forces.

By the conclusion of the novel, Geeta neither completely rejects tradition nor entirely abandons modern values. Instead, she constructs a balanced identity that incorporates elements of both worlds. This synthesis represents personal growth and demonstrates the possibility of negotiating individuality within traditional social frameworks (Butler, 1990).

Conclusion

The review of literature demonstrates that Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* offers a profound exploration of women's experiences within patriarchal society. The novel critically examines the restrictions imposed upon women while simultaneously highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and agency.

The analysis reveals that patriarchal institutions significantly influence women's identities and everyday experiences. Nevertheless, women are not depicted solely as victims of oppression. Through negotiation, self-awareness, and perseverance, they create spaces for autonomy and self-expression.

Geeta's journey symbolizes the broader struggles faced by many Indian women who attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity. Her transformation illustrates that identity is not static but continuously shaped through social interaction and personal reflection.

The study concludes that *Inside the Haveli* remains a significant contribution to feminist literature because it foregrounds women's search for identity, dignity, and selfhood within a deeply patriarchal social order.

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