

## **Navigating Gender and Cultural Norms: A Comparative Study of Feminist Perspectives in Toni Morrison's Sula, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, and Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli**

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the feminist viewpoints of three distinguished authors: Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Rama Mehta. Toni Morrison, an esteemed recipient of the Nobel Prize and a significant figure in African American literature, skillfully portrays the experiences of African American women, illuminating the complex interaction between race and gender in creating their societal roles. Morrison's novels shed focus on the tenuous situation of Black women, emphasizing the dual influences of racial and gender subjugation that shape their encounters. Arundhati Roy, a renowned novelist who has won the Booker Prize and is well-regarded in Indian English literature, is praised for her sharp analysis of societal injustices, such as casteism and gender inequity. Rama Mehta, a renowned sociologist and laureate of the Sahitya Akademi Award, conducts a thorough analysis of the subjugation and exclusion of women in traditional Indian culture. This research examines the works of Morrison, Roy, and Mehta, namely Sula, The God of Small Things, and Inside the Haveli, to investigate how these writers effectively express and enhance feminist viewpoints via their narratives. The study reveals a common narrative of exploitation, humiliation, and marginalization when examining the portrayal of women's difficulties in both American and Indian cultures. Although originating from different cultural contexts, these works focus on women's defiance of oppressive social conventions, enhancing our holistic comprehension of worldwide feminism. The research highlights how these stories give women authority, presenting them as proactive individuals who defy and undermine male-dominated systems. By defying established standards, the characters challenge the status quo and create opportunities for alternate lifestyles, providing a powerful criticism of entrenched power relations. This study emphasizes the significance of these works in promoting a more profound, intercultural conversation on the intricacies of gender, racism, and social justice.

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**Keywords:** feminism, race and gender, marginalization, oppression, patriarchal structures, cross-cultural dialogue, global feminism, resistance

African American women, who have faced the combined oppression of race, class, and gender, have traditionally encountered significant fragmentation. Nevertheless, a group of female authors, such as Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Anne Petry, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor, have fearlessly revealed the prevalent societal inequities, including racism, classism, and sexism, that exist in American culture. Toni Morrison has a unique and esteemed place in African American literature due to her depiction of African Americans' complex and diverse realities. Her writings effectively capture and chronicle the pain, degradation, and abuse experienced by African American women. Morrison establishes herself as a trailblazer in the realm of African American women's literature of protest, boldly confronting the deeply ingrained ideology of racism in her first book, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Her impact on the literary heritage of female authors is substantial and revolutionary. An in-depth analysis of Morrison's work reveals her tremendous creative acumen and prowess as a writer. Shaila Bala perceptively notes that Morrison's idea of fiction writing is a transformative and thought-provoking technique that brings our attention to the current and painful realities of modern society (76). Morrison adeptly portrays the intricate and marginalized experiences of Black individuals in her literary works, exploring issues such as racial prejudice, socioeconomic and gender oppression, motherhood, personal identity, and the female experience.

The novel *Sula* (1973) follows the heroine, Sula Peace, as she is on a resolute journey to establish her identity in a culture that is mostly controlled by African American males. Sula distinguishes herself from Morrison's other female characters with her unwavering determination to establish her own identity, finally achieving a state of personal freedom. The community regards Sula's nonconformity and "lawlessness" with distrust since they find it difficult to embrace her resistance. Nana Banyiwá-Horne concisely summarises Sula's stance: "Sula is an outcast whose principles often contradict those embraced by her local community. She is ostracised specifically because she refuses to conform to ideas that promote sameness and suppress individuality" (31). Sula's defiance of society's standards and rejection of conventional expectations, such as marriage and children, distinguish her as an exceptionally independent woman. On the other hand, Nel, who is a close friend of Sula, embodies a more traditional route, conforming to societal norms yet nurturing a strong need for individual autonomy. Morrison depicts Sula as an individual who forges her own trajectory, displaying a lack of interest in conforming to the societal expectations imposed upon her. She is a woman motivated by her own dreams and ambitions, refusing to adhere to conventional ideas about family, marriage, and mother responsibility. Sula's life is defined by a deliberate refusal to conform to societal expectations of feminine duties. Eva, Sula's grandmother, who supports traditional gender roles, encourages Sula to comply by getting married and starting a family,

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as she believes it would provide her with security. Nevertheless, Sula's reply serves as a resolute assertion of independence: "I have no desire to create another individual." I want to improve myself. Morrison uses Sula's storytelling to question the idea that women are just meant to be spouses and mothers. She emphasizes the pursuit of personal independence as a key subject in the book.

K. Sumana observes that Sula provides fresh possibilities for examining African-American women's literature and for broader African-American literary analysis. The book undoubtedly establishes a fresh and influential framework for the social and narrative possibilities of Black women. Sula subverts conventional conventions placed on Black women, questioning deeply ingrained cultural expectations. Sayyed Mujahid observes that Sula challenges conventional sexual norms by ignoring the concept of marital ownership and embracing the notion that sex is non-competitive and non-threatening (85). Hannah and Sula's personalities provide a means to examine female sexuality, especially in its confrontation with male-dominated systems in their culture. Jayita Sengupta argues that while Hannah, who engages in prostitution in the novel Sula, is widely disapproved of, she is not strongly disliked by the community. Hannah actively contributes to and participates in the shared pool of male partners, whereas Sula uses Jude to fill a personal void inside herself" (131).

The dynamic between Sula and Jude, who is married to Nel, adds complexity to our understanding of female sexuality. Nel's perception of their closeness exposes a primal and instinctual depiction of their relationship: "However, they had been in a position on the floor, completely unclothed, without physical contact except for their lips...on all fours like (yes, indeed, say it) like canines" (105). Sula's unabashed quest for sexual gratification with several partners, including Jude and the jobless young man Ajax, provokes intense criticism from the Medallion society. Their interactions are portrayed as being motivated mostly by carnal desire rather than a genuine emotional bond. Morrison skillfully depicts their sexual encounter: "She positioned her head beneath his chin, acknowledging the futility of resisting any emotions or desires."He engulfed her lips in the same way that her thighs had engulfed his genitals, and the atmosphere in the house became very silent" (131).

Morrison portrays Sula as a lady who fearlessly challenges the traditional expectations placed on Black women in African American communities. Sula's efforts to establish her individuality and independence confront the gender-based norms that have traditionally oppressed, victimized, and taken advantage of women. Sula, following in the footsteps of her independent grandmother Eva and mother Hannah, asserts autonomy in her life while facing societal disapproval. The narrator emphasizes the gravity of her offenses, stating that Sula is accused of doing an "unforgivable" act that leads to irreversible consequences, leaving a

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permanent stain that cannot be cleaned. According to them, it was claimed that Sula engaged in sexual relations with Caucasian individuals (112).

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* offers a deep examination of femininity, specifically within the framework of a Black woman's search for self-identity. Sula, being one of Morrison's most captivating characters, exemplifies the bravery to challenge cultural standards, thus becoming a symbol of defiance for women who refuse to conform to traditional roles. On the other hand, Nel, who is Sula's close friend, does not take advantage of the same potential for self-discovery that Sula actively seeks. Nel's intense grief upon reaching the end of the text demonstrates her delayed comprehension of Sula's fundamental nature: "Throughout that entire duration, I believed that I was experiencing a sense of absence in relation to Jude." The weight of the defeat bore down on her chest and rose up into her throat. She said, as if clarifying, "We were girls together." 'Oh Lord Sula,' she exclaimed, 'girl, girl, girl.' The scream was powerful and sustained, although it lacked a clear beginning and end, just consisting of endless cycles of agony. The mourning highlights the strong connection between the two women and Nel's recognition of the emotional emptiness caused by Sula's death.

The untimely demise of Chicken Little intensifies the mournful atmosphere of the story. According to Sandeep Pathak, *Sula* is a profoundly mournful story that explores themes of loss, grief, and the alleviation of suffering. Sula's ultimate downfall in her love connection with Ajax does not reduce her importance as a figure who challenges conventional gender norms. Despite the personal hardships she experiences, Sula emerges as a transformational character, presenting a fresh model for African American women. Morrison uses the opposing experiences of Sula and Nel to criticize the repressive economic and social structures in America. This highlights the difficulties that Black women have while trying to break free from the limitations imposed by their communities.

In Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), the main character, Ammu, experiences significant marginalization and dehumanization, which mirrors the wider systemic persecution of women in India. Ammu's position as a divorcee exposes her and her daughters, Rahel and Estha, to societal exclusion. Similar to the figure Velutha, they live outside of civilization and face systematic prejudice. Ammu's encounters with patriarchal violence start inside her own household when her father, Pappachi, belittles the significance of her education, asserting that "a college education was an extraneous expenditure for a female" (38). Her brother Chacko, in sharp contrast, is sent to Oxford. Her mother, Mammachi, goes as far as pawning her jewelry to finance his schooling. This discrepancy demonstrates the deeply rooted gender prejudice that relegates women to a subordinate position in a society that is mostly controlled by males. Ammu's existence is characterized by neglect and marginalization, which becomes more apparent when her eighteenth birthday goes unnoticed, and her chances of getting married are impeded by her father's inability to provide

an appropriate dowry. Roy's indictment of patriarchal and societal practices that oppress and make women vulnerable is conveyed via Ammu's tale.

Arundhati Roy skilfully depicts the challenges Ammu faces in her novel, *The God of Small Things*, as she strives to break free from the suffocating control of patriarchal authority both within her own family and in society at large. Ammu's fervent desire to escape the limitations of Ayemenam compels her to go to Calcutta, where she enters into marriage with Baba, with the expectation that this alliance will elevate her social standing. Unfortunately, her dreams are shattered when she learns that Baba is not only a heavy drinker but also a dishonest and violent spouse. The arrival of her twins, Rahel and Estha, exacerbates her entanglement in a web of home sorrow, as Baba fails to provide any assistance for his family. However, he ruthlessly takes advantage of Ammu, even proposing that she engage in a sexual relationship with his employer, Mr. Hollick, in order to protect his own employment. As a result of this final act of disloyalty, Ammu is compelled to end her marriage with Baba and go back to Ayemenam, where she is subjected to constant humiliation due to her status as a divorced woman.

Ammu's predicament is reflected by her mother, Mammachi, who likewise endures the burden of masculine chauvinism. Her husband, Pappachi, demonstrates this harshness by sabotaging her business endeavors to establish a pickle plant, belittling her work as unworthy of a former government official. The story portrays his envy of her youth and achievements via the depiction of severe physical violence, as seen by the recurring act of beating her with a metal flower vase every night. The acts of physical assault were not novel. The only thing that was different was the frequency at which they occurred. This aggression is not limited to Ammu and Mammachi; it also affects Margaret Kochamma. Despite her early efforts to establish her own identity, she becomes marginalized after marrying Chacko, whose controlling behavior makes her life devoid of purpose.

The story portrays these women as individuals who suffer from a patriarchal society that fosters domestic abuse and deprives them of their independence. According to Rujuta Deshmukh, domestic violence is widespread globally, but its severity is particularly high in South Asian nations. Domestic violence in India is strongly influenced by the long-standing system of patriarchy and the associated systems of male dominance, as stated by Deshmukh (2007). Roy's tale serves as a criticism of the cultural system that regards women just as instruments for satisfying male needs. Ammu and Mammachi are shown as victims of oppression entirely due to their gender, enduring spousal brutality and patriarchal control without any personal wrongdoing.

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Chacko, who embodies the highest level of male dominance, worsens Ammu's pain by imposing his authority over both the family and the Paradise Pickle plant. The author's contemptuous demeanor towards Ammu is epitomized by his assertion, "What belongs to you is mine, and what belongs to me is also mine" (57), which mirrors the pervasive gender disparities in Indian culture. Women, similar to the Dalits, are deprived of their due position in the social hierarchy and often deprived of their inheritance, which further marginalizes them.

Ammu's social isolation and lack of attention from her family compelled her to find comfort and support in the companionship of Velutha, a member of the untouchable caste. Ashok Chasker accurately notes that Ammu, a member of the Syrian Christian family who is considered touchable yet a woman, is unable to repress her biological desires and sexual hunger. Essentially, she is a recently widowed young woman who needs a partner, regardless of their social background, to fulfill her sexual desires. In spite of the social prohibition, Ammu and Velutha find comfort in one other's presence, establishing a connection that challenges the inflexible conventions of caste and gender. Nevertheless, their connection is characterized by a profound awareness of its transience, as Roy recounts: "Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (338). The immense entities always loomed inside. They were aware that they had nowhere to go. They had no belongings. Lack of prospects. The individuals focused on little details. This poignant tale of love highlights the overarching themes of subjugation and the quest for self-discovery amid a society that mercilessly upholds its power structures.

Ammu and Velutha's clandestine connection develops over thirteen nights, during which they engage in a passionate romance despite the strict societal divisions that keep them apart. Ammu, motivated by her innate biological instincts, challenges established social conventions in her quest for individual satisfaction. G.D. Barche notes that Ammu had violated societal norms of love yet adhered to the innate precepts of 'Swadharma' by engaging in a physical relationship with Velutha, an individual considered untouchable. However, their romance is filled with danger, as Velutha's father, Vellya Pappen, finally betrays them by notifying Mammachi about their forbidden love. Vellya Pappen, who has been oppressed for a long time due to the supremacy of high-caste Christians, is too afraid to question the existing social hierarchy, and instead, he complies with it.

Mammachi's response is characterized by intense rage and revulsion, revealing the deeply ingrained biases present among the Ayemenam community. She vehemently criticizes Vellya

Pappen, labeling him as an "inebriated canine!" The protagonist, in an inebriated state, accuses Paravan of being a deceitful person and thereafter turns her anger against Velutha. The book vividly portrays this moment with remarkable intensity: "She had let out a piercing scream, finally." "Leave!" If I discover your presence on my premises tomorrow, I will take measures to remove your reproductive organs, similar to how one would treat a despised and outcast canine. I will arrange for your demise. The user's text is rewritten in a manner that is direct and concise. Mammachi spewed saliva across Velutha's face. Viscous saliva. It splashed upon his skin. The character's lips and eyes are described on page 284. The romantic relationship between Ammu, a lady belonging to a high social caste, and Velutha, a person considered untouchable, is considered shameful, resulting in their severe condemnation and punishment.

The work examines the cultural hypocrisy that deems Ammu's innate want for closeness as immoral and forbidden, purely due to its transgression of caste boundaries. Following Sophie Mol's burial, Ammu and her children are socially excluded, thereby becoming outsiders even inside their own family. This situation underscores the widespread impact of caste and gender in their marginalization. Roy's depiction of Ayemenam highlights the enduring dominance of Indian orthodoxy, which consistently oppresses women, as observed by C. Gopinathan Pillai: "The issues of male domination and female subordination, and the conflict between the two, are deeply ingrained in the particular geocultural context of Ayemenam" (88).

Baby Kochamma, a character deeply rooted in the caste system, nurtures a profound animosity against Ammu as a result of her association with Velutha. Ammu, by selecting Velutha as her love interest, disregards the inflexible societal frameworks that restrict permissible conduct. Barche's analysis of Ammu's rebellion is quite pertinent: "She (Ammu) defied the societal norms of love but adhered to the innate principles of 'Swadharma' by engaging in a physical relationship with Velutha, an individual considered untouchable" (43). By doing this, Ammu becomes a maverick, defying the existing societal limitations that aim to regulate and suppress women. Despite society's disapproval, her acts demonstrate a deep opposition to the patriarchal and caste-based standards that attempt to define her identity.

Rama Mehta's novel "Inside the Haveli" (1977) provides a detailed depiction of Geeta's life. Geeta, a young and educated lady from Bombay, is abruptly immersed in the strict and traditional society of Udaipur after her marriage. The story highlights the clash between traditional and contemporary values, with the haveli representing the deep-rooted practices of Indian culture, while Geeta personifies the forward-thinking principles of city life. The conflict is heightened by the opposing cities of Bombay and Udaipur, both exemplifying unique cultural perspectives.

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Geeta's childhood in Bombay, marked by attending schools that educate both boys and girls and being exposed to the lively atmosphere of a large city, sharply differs from the constrained atmosphere she experiences in Udaipur. Geeta, a nineteen-year-old bride married to Ajay Singh, a science professor, is brought to Jeevan Niwas, a grand haveli with strong traditional values. Here, the ladies are secluded by purdah and adhere to stringent social norms that dictate their daily routines. Geeta finds the shift from the open and modern environment of Bombay to the secluded and male-dominated haveli to be a sudden and unsettling experience. This transition represents the larger conflict between modern principles and traditional customs.

Geeta finds the social demands inside the haveli overwhelming since she is not used to the closed-off and hierarchical structure of her new home. The phrase, "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?" (17) exemplifies the deep-rooted conviction in the segregation of women from societal involvement, a conviction that sharply contradicts Geeta's past existence in Bombay. She has a sense of confinement inside the haveli, as she is encircled by several women, servants, and visiting neighbors, all of whom strictly abide by the household's traditional standards of behavior.

Malashri Lal accurately notes that Geeta experiences culture shock as a result of transitioning from theoretical knowledge to practical application, leading to a deeper understanding of social realities (88). This comment emphasizes the stark contrast between Geeta's theoretical comprehension of contemporary existence and the harsh actualities of her unfamiliar surroundings. The haveli, including distinct accommodations for males and females, epitomizes a societal structure in which gender segregation is rigorously maintained. Women belonging to the upper class adhere to the practice of purdah, which entails limited contact with male family members. The movements of these male relatives are meticulously planned and notified beforehand. On the other hand, the servants, who belong to a lower social class, are not restricted by strict rules. They are able to freely communicate with their spouses, as mentioned in the text: "In their courtyard, there is no barrier separating them, the maids are allowed to converse with their husbands; they do not have to wait until night-time to share their thoughts with them" (6).

Although Geeta has been married for two years, she has never met her father-in-law or grandfather-in-law. However, male authority is present in every area of life inside the haveli. The family is centered on the interests and desires of these invisible male figures, highlighting the widespread impact of male authority inside the home. Geeta's experience in the haveli provides a powerful analysis of the wider social systems that uphold and sustain gender inequality, shedding light on the difficulties encountered by women who strive to reconcile the overlapping demands of tradition and modernity.



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Within the haveli, males are highly respected and regarded almost like gods. The women who live in their presence obediently follow their every want with utmost accuracy and attention to detail (21). Geeta's mother-in-law, on the other hand, had the objective of proving that "even a girl with an education can be influenced" (30), indicating her desire to modify Geeta's contemporary beliefs to conform to conventional standards. Geeta's mother-in-law's sympathetic, although condescending, attitude, along with her husband's devotion, helps Geeta adjust to her new surroundings. Geeta's intermittent outbursts highlight her ongoing internal conflict, indicating her unwillingness to completely abandon her uniqueness despite her growing respect for some traditions. When Dhapu, Geeta's personal maid, criticizes Geeta's public show of devotion for her daughter Vijay, Geeta responds by saying, "Cease your lectures; I am weary of the insincerity that pervades this place..." I despise all this frivolous commotion! Do not dictate to me how I should handle my own offspring! (32). This outburst exemplifies her exasperation with the obligatory facades of her newfound existence.

Geeta, confined inside the haveli, desperately clings to the expectation that her husband would fulfill his promise of moving to Delhi. Nevertheless, as time elapses and Vijay matures into a youngster of school-going age, Geeta makes a hasty decision by enrolling Sita, the daughter of the maid Lakshmi, in school. Sita, a girl of the same age as Vijay who has lost her mother, serves as a powerful emblem of defiance against the rigid traditions of the haveli. Geeta's choice to provide education to a kid of a servant is a courageous and controversial one, backed only by her father-in-law but faced with disapproval from the other servants, maids, and her mother-in-law. Geeta's act of disobedience against the haveli's cultural norms, which require complete surrender and exerting strict control over its residents, displays her increasing opposition to the repressive standards.

Rama Mehta observes that educated women are often less willing to support antiquated ideals that they regard as oppressive and obsolete. According to her observation, the younger generation is more focused on maximizing prospects for wealth and social standing and less concerned with upholding the traditional socio-religious duties associated with their caste or group. This change in generations poses a challenge to long-established traditions, which see any divergence as heretical. Malashri Lal accurately highlights Mehta's proposition that affluent, well-educated women should serve as role models for those in disadvantaged circumstances, even if doing so means compromising some contemporary ideals of emancipation (101). Mehta's depiction of Geeta's struggle exemplifies the wider conflicts between traditional values and modernization, highlighting the difficulties that women have in navigating these opposing domains.

Despite facing numerous challenges and criticisms and grappling with her own reservations, Geeta persists with her educational initiatives. As she notes, "Geeta knew that some of the maids were forced to leave the classes, but even those havelis which tried to threaten or

discipline their servants encouraged their own daughters and daughters-in-law to go and learn something useful from the classes" (179). Geeta's dedication eventually yields positive results, culminating in Sita's marriage to an educated man with a stable livelihood, including a house, land, and livestock. This success demonstrates the effectiveness of Geeta's efforts.

Over time, Geeta begins to see beyond the superficial layers of ritual and tradition, discovering a profound reservoir of warmth and affection among the haveli's inhabitants. She learns to appreciate the deep-seated emotional connections and continuity within the haveli's culture. Her initial resistance gradually dissolves, and she finds herself more integrated into the community. This shift is captured aptly by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, who observes, "Although Geeta gradually gets used to its life-changing herself in the process, she also subtly changes her immediate environment and the people concerned" (753).

A.G. Khan also highlights the delicate balance Geeta maintains between modernity and tradition: "In the process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any, she induces her mother-in-law with a feeling of warmth towards modernity" (44). Mehta portrays Geeta's evolution through distinct phases. Initially, Geeta's movements are tentative and awkward, characterized by a mix of fear and fascination with the haveli's life. By the second section of the novel, she gains some confidence, although her fascination turns into resentment and subtle animosity. In the third section, Geeta emerges as a confident, assertive figure who navigates the haveli's traditions with a blend of serenity and subtle rebellion. She is acknowledged as the new lady of the haveli, poised to bridge the gap between ancient customs and modern aspirations. The novel's conclusion, though abrupt, suggests a promising future for Geeta. It envisions her as a progressive figure capable of harmonizing the enduring traditions of the haveli with the demands of contemporary life.

In examining the works of Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Rama Mehta, one observes a poignant portrayal of gender discrimination within their respective societies. Morrison's *Sula*, Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* each unveil the detrimental impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives, highlighting the pervasive loss of autonomy experienced by female characters.

Morrison's *Sula* presents a powerful critique of societal norms through the character of Sula Peace, who defies conventional gender roles and challenges the oppressive constraints imposed by her community. Sula's assertiveness and her resistance to conformity position her as a symbol of defiance against patriarchal control, thus offering a narrative that underscores the complexities of female identity and resistance.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy explores the rigid caste and gender hierarchies that confine Ammu, a woman whose personal choices and desires clash with societal

expectations. Ammu's tragic journey reflects the broader systemic injustices faced by women, while her brief, rebellious relationship with Velutha signifies a struggle against entrenched social norms. Roy's depiction of Ammu and her interactions within a repressive environment calls attention to the deep-seated cultural and institutional barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.

Similarly, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* contrasts the modernity of Geeta, a city-bred woman from Bombay, with the traditional constraints of a haveli in Udaipur. Geeta's initial discomfort and eventual adaptation within the haveli symbolize the broader clash between progressive ideals and conservative traditions. Her efforts to introduce educational opportunities for the maid's daughter represent a subtle yet significant challenge to the established gender norms of her new home.

Collectively, these novels offer critical insights into the effects of patriarchy on women's lives and their struggles for self-definition. Morrison, Roy, and Mehta not only expose the oppressive forces of gender discrimination but also portray their protagonists as embodiments of resistance and agency. Through their narratives, these authors contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality, providing valuable reflections on the intersection of tradition and modernity in the quest for women's liberation. The portrayal of women like Sula, Ammu, and Geeta as role models navigating and challenging patriarchal constraints underscores the enduring relevance of these works in advocating for gender equality in the 21st century.

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