



Negotiating Feminine Power: Feminine Autonomy And Identity Formation Among Royal Women In Gita Mehta's Raj

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Abstract

This study explores the complex negotiation of feminine power, autonomy, and identity formation among royal women in Gita Mehta's Raj. Set against the shifting political landscape of colonial India, the novel traces how princely women navigated the competing pressures of tradition, gendered expectations, and emerging modernity. Through the protagonist Jaya and the women who surround her, Mehta reconstructs a world where political structures, family lineage, and patriarchal customs simultaneously constrain and cultivate feminine agency. The research examines how Jaya's identity is shaped by her upbringing, education, domestic experiences, and exposure to colonial politics, revealing the multilayered struggles and strategies women used within both private and public spheres. Drawing upon feminist theory and historical context, the analysis highlights how storytelling, memory, and cultural continuity serve as vital sources of strength for women negotiating power within rigid social hierarchies. Mehta's portrayal demonstrates that royal women were neither passive nor peripheral but active participants in sustaining, resisting, and redefining authority. Their endurance, self-respect, and pursuit of selfhood emerges as central forces in challenging patriarchal structures. This study ultimately argues that Raj, through its nuanced depiction of royal women, contributes significantly to discourses on feminine subjectivity in colonial India, revealing the complex ways in which women carved out space for autonomy within deeply entrenched systems of control.

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Introduction

The history of princely India under British colonial rule reflects a deep tension between sovereignty, identity, and political subordination. The princely states outwardly enjoyed royal privilege, yet their authority was constantly shaped—and often undermined—by imperial control. This contradiction is powerfully illustrated through the experiences of Indian rulers who navigated both internal responsibilities and external pressures from the British Crown. Many rulers recognized that their autonomy was symbolic rather than real, as their economic resources, administrative decisions, and military structures were systematically constrained by colonial policy. The weight of these constraints is evident in the frustrations expressed within Indian courts, where rulers openly acknowledged that British authority drained wealth from their territories and restricted their control over armed forces. Such reflections highlight how colonial extraction impoverished both the common population and the royal houses, revealing the shared vulnerability of colonized regions. These perspectives clarify that princely power operated within a framework designed to secure British economic and political dominance rather than genuine partnership. The emotional and psychological impact of this subordination also emerges in the cultural dissonance experienced by Indian princes who traveled to or were educated in Britain. Encounters with England's material prosperity and imperial confidence made stark the gap between ceremonial equality and actual dependence. Observing imperial rituals and displays of power, many princes came to see that the language of brotherhood and alliance masked a hierarchy in which real authority rested with the Crown. Their sense of displacement—caught between admiration for imperial modernity and attachment to their own lands—intensified this awareness of unequal relations. Together, these perspectives frame the broader context of colonial India as a landscape where royal identity, cultural pride, and political aspiration were continually reshaped by imperial domination. The princely states functioned within a paradox: they were celebrated as sovereign on paper yet bound by structures that limited independent action. This introduction sets the stage for analyzing how rulers negotiated power, resisted control, and sought to preserve dignity within an unequal colonial relationship.

Historical and Familial Foundations of Agency

The emergence of feminine agency in Raj does not arise from modern ideas of liberation but from a deeply historical world structured by royal lineage, duty, and inherited cultural expectations. From childhood, Jaya is formed within aristocratic Hindu–Kshatriya codes that define femininity as discipline, sacrifice, and symbolic presence. Her identity evolves within a world where royalty and gender are inseparable—performed daily through rituals, gestures, clothes, silence, and obedience. As Judith Butler argues, gender is “performed into being” and the palace becomes the primary stage for that performance. Through ritual and repetition, Jaya learns that femininity in princely India must be displayed impeccably even when it conceals personal desire.

The palace environment is majestic yet suffocating, central to the political image of the state yet deliberately distant from real power. This space resembles what Gayatri Spivak describes as the “shadowy hegemony of tradition. Jaya’s mother, the Queen, embodies this contradiction: her presence commands silence and respect, yet her influence remains strictly ceremonial. Jaya recalls that “She never raised her voice, but the room silenced itself around her,” illustrating how royal women project power without being permitted political agency.

It is within this world that Jaya’s earliest political consciousness begins to form, not through formal education but through overheard conversations among royal women. Her sheltered upbringing is directly disrupted in a key moment when visiting maharanis expose her to the political anxieties of the princely states:

“Jaya’s insulation from outside events was shattered by the arrival of the Indian rulers... Sitting on the verandah of the Wales Palace, the visiting maharanis expounded angrily on the scandalous manner in which the British Empire was dethroning India’s kings. ‘The Angrez are trying to drive a wedge between ourselves and British India, so they can keep their empire.’” (p. 95).

This moment marks Jaya’s first encounter with the political tensions surrounding colonial interference, demonstrating that her awareness is shaped within familial and gendered spaces rather than public institutions.

Such scenes affirm the duality highlighted by Nagajothi and Ganesan (2020), who observe that

“The patriarch is the centre, but by the reverse logic of the postcolonial text, it is Jaya who wields real power and she is the sufferer.”

Jaya is privileged yet vulnerable, honoured yet controlled. Her experiences reflect both the burden and the symbolic weight placed on royal women as custodians of dynastic culture.

The symbolic power royal women hold is not superficial; it becomes the foundation for agency. Jaya is repeatedly told, “You are not just one life. You are the memory of your ancestors,” situating her identity within a continuum of lineage and legitimacy. While this burdens her with expectation, it also gives her an authoritative sense of historical belonging. Kumar (2023) notes that these early values—duty, belonging, and sacrifice—later enable

Jaya to reinterpret power on her own terms. Thus, the structures that confine her simultaneously craft the moral and intellectual framework through which she eventually resists oppression

Education, upbringing, and the shaping of identity

Education in Raj functions not simply as instruction but as a deliberate ideological force shaping Jaya's early consciousness. From her earliest years, her upbringing reflects the duality of princely India itself—split between traditional Rajput values and the pressures of Western influence. This dual education, comprising Hindu scriptures, statecraft, horsemanship, ceremonial training, and British-style tutoring, produces in Jaya a hybrid identity that mirrors India's own cultural transformation under colonialism.

This formative training is grounded in strict aristocratic discipline. A pivotal scene illustrates how Jaya's childhood becomes an arena for performing courage, hierarchy, and obedience—the very values expected of royal heirs:

“On a cold January morning when Jaya was five years old, her father insisted she accompany him into the jungle. The Maharani objected. The Maharajah overruled her. ‘You coddle the children too much...’ Under her veil the Maharani frowned in concern... Jaya clung to the shikari, eyes squeezed shut, even as she felt herself being lowered into someone's arms and carried closer to the panther...” (p. 5)

Placed here, this citation shows how Jaya's education begins not in a classroom but in a symbolic confrontation with danger—an early initiation into royal expectations of bravery, endurance, and submission to patriarchal authority. Her father's insistence and her mother's powerless concern reflect gendered tensions that shape Jaya's identity from childhood: men decide, women witness, and children absorb.

Within the palace, education becomes an instrument of ideological molding. Royal girls are trained in refinement, grace, and restraint—qualities that support ceremonial femininity but discourage intellectual independence. Yet the introduction of Western pedagogical practices exposes Jaya to unfamiliar ideas of autonomy, questioning, and selfhood. This exposure plants the earliest seeds of internal resistance. As Jayasudha (2017) notes,

“The novel charts a gradual shift in consciousness from princess to autonomous woman, marking a decisive departure from established gender roles” (p. 509).

This tension between traditional conditioning and emerging personal insight becomes the central battleground of Jaya's identity formation. While rituals and royal etiquette confine her, they also inadvertently cultivate discipline, reflection, and emotional depth—qualities that later empower her to reinterpret the meaning of feminine agency. Her education does not liberate her outright; instead, it awakens an internal dialogue through which she begins to question inherited norms.

The interplay between restrictive formal education and expansive informal learning thus reveals how identity in Raj is shaped simultaneously by limitations and possibilities. Mehta presents feminine autonomy not as a rupture from early influences but as a transformation that emerges through navigating contradictory teachings. Jaya's upbringing—filled with ritual expectation, emotional conflict, and moments of intellectual awakening—becomes the first arena where her power quietly begins to take shape.

Education, therefore, is not merely a background element in her life; it is the foundation of her evolving subjectivity, where the seeds of resistance, self-awareness, and agency are first planted.

Storytelling, knowledge transmission, and the power of imagination

Storytelling emerges as one of the most powerful modes of resistance available to women in Gita Mehta's Raj. Within the highly regulated environment of princely India—where women are denied political influence and structural authority—oral narratives become a vital means of transmitting culture, history, and alternative interpretations of power. Through legends, myths, family histories, and whispered memories, royal women function as custodians of knowledge that challenges the dominant patriarchal and colonial narratives.

Jaya's grandmother plays a formative role in this tradition. She teaches Jaya that kingdoms rise and fall, but memory survives beyond political conquest. “Empires collapse, but memory is the real throne,” she reminds her—a lesson that becomes central to Jaya's understanding of cultural inheritance and symbolic power. Through these narratives, Jaya encounters forms of womanhood that defy the constraints of her immediate world—warrior queens, ascetics, rebels, matriarchs—figures who model agency long before she finds her own voice.

As Bhatnagar (2023) observes

“Oral memory becomes an empowering space where Jaya encounters alternative possibilities of womanhood.”

This process of internalizing stories becomes Jaya's first act of intellectual liberation. Imagination, for her, is not escapism, but a preparatory tool for resistance.

This dynamic resonates strongly with Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern voices survive not in official archives—often written by colonial and elite male authorities—but in cultural memory, oral history, and informal channels of storytelling. Mehta dramatizes this theory through Jaya's evolution: her transformation is shaped not only by institutions such as the palace, the British court, or the nationalist movement, but by whispered histories, unrecorded voices, and imaginative retellings that redefine her sense of self.

Thus, storytelling in *Raj* becomes an epistemological rebellion—a means of thinking oneself into existence in a world that denies women formal recognition. By preserving stories, interpreting them, and imagining alternatives, women like Jaya construct identities that resist erasure and assert continuity, dignity, and agency against the forces seeking to contain them.

Public role, political agency, and negotiating power

The most transformative phase of Jaya's journey begins when she steps beyond the inner quarters of the palace and enters public life. Unlike traditional feminist narratives where agency is achieved through an explicit rupture with domestic roles, *Raj* portrays public political engagement as an extension of feminine power already cultivated in private spaces. Jaya's transition from princess to stateswoman demonstrates how autonomy is often negotiated, not granted, within patriarchal structures.

Royal women in princely India were never expected to participate directly in governance, yet they were always implicated in politics. They attended ceremonies, observed diplomatic interactions, and represented cultural authority. This symbolic power often dismissed as mere ornamentation becomes, for Jaya, the foundation for her later entry into political life. As Jayasudha (2017) notes, "*Jaya represents the class of princes who turn into politicians of democratic India*," highlighting how she embodies both continuity and transformation.

Jaya's political awakening begins when she recognizes the limits of royal masculinity. Her husband, though symbolically powerful, is increasingly powerless in the face of decolonization and nationalist resistance. The novel makes clear that true authority lies not in inherited privilege but in the understanding of political structures: "power does not belong to those who sit on thrones but to those who understand how thrones are built." This revelation enables Jaya to reconceive power not as destiny but as a strategic, ethical engagement with society.

Her political consciousness deepens when she witnesses nationalist leaders negotiating India's future.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, Sarojini Naidu lifted a plump hand... 'Remember we are only spokesmen for the aspirations of those we represent. Whatever fears divide us, we share a common aspiration for liberty. Let us fight to have the British Empire accept an All India Federation...'" (p. 110).

This moment marks Jaya's first close encounter with female nationalist leadership and demonstrates how women used rhetorical skill, diplomacy, and moral persuasion to influence political outcomes. Sarojini Naidu's intervention becomes a model for Jaya, showing that feminine political expression need not imitate masculine aggression to be effective.

Jaya's entry into public life is shaped by personal loss and political upheaval. As colonial domination weakens and democratic ideals spread, she realizes that remaining silent would mean surrendering both personal dignity and historical responsibility. Kumar (2023) argues that Jaya's political transformation "fuses the personal and the political, making her journey emblematic of a larger national refusal to remain subordinate." Jaya's decision to engage in politics thus reflects not only feminist agency but also the broader postcolonial effort to reclaim voice and autonomy.

The novel draws historical parallels to real women like Maharani Gayatri Devi and Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia, who translated royal prestige into democratic legitimacy. As Bhatnagar (2023) observes, "*Modernity in Raj is not a rejection of the past but a reconfiguration of inherited authority*." Jaya exemplifies this reconfiguration: she neither abandons tradition nor becomes its passive instrument. Instead, she reshapes it to suit emerging political realities.

What distinguishes Jaya's political identity is that it remains grounded in feminine ethics—memory, relationality, and cultural continuity—rather than adopting patriarchal styles of domination. "For the first time," she reflects, "I was not being displayed. I was speaking." This marks her transformation into what Butler (1990) calls a rearticulated subject—one who has been shaped by discourse yet can now reshape it.

Ultimately, Jaya's political agency emerges not from rebellion alone but from negotiation, historical consciousness, and self-respect. She embodies a hybrid form of power that destabilizes colonial and patriarchal binaries, offering a new model of feminist leadership rooted in both tradition and modernity.

Power In Constraint – Feminine Resistance And Assertiveness

In *Raj*, Gita Mehta explores one of the most powerful paradoxes of womanhood in traditional societies: the ability to exercise agency from within confinement. For Jaya, power does not emerge from open rebellion but through

the strategic navigation of culturally sanctioned spaces. Even when seemingly constrained by gendered expectations, she develops a sophisticated understanding of politics, influence, and self-assertion. This nuanced portrayal reflects what feminist theorists identify as “negotiated agency”—the ability to resist structurally imposed limitations without directly rejecting social norms.

This dynamic is illustrated vividly through the daily lives of royal women, whose authority is tied to ritual, duty, and endurance. The novel underscores how feminine strength often appears in quiet, disciplined acts that sustain political and social continuity. Mehta highlights this through a powerful depiction of the Maharani’s early morning devotions and her quiet leadership during difficult times.

“The Maharani rose before dawn and went to the Temple of the Balmer Maharanis to sit in solitary communion with the spirits of her predecessors... The knowledge of continuity in those dark hours gave the Maharani a serenity which sustained her through the deprivation she witnessed daily. When her pujas, her devotions, were completed, the Maharani watched... as her husband mounted his horse... occasionally she held an assembly, a durbar, for refugee women... The lanterns, almost hidden by haloes of buzzing insects, had to be placed at a distance so their heat would not add to the intolerable closeness of the night” (p. 70–71).

This scene encapsulates the essence of feminine power under constraint: ritual becomes resilience, silence becomes influence, and endurance becomes a form of moral authority. Even within the boundaries of purdah and palace protocol, the Maharani embodies a dignified defiance suggesting that power can circulate through compassion, memory, and steadfastness.

By the time Jaya enters the political arena, her strength lies in her mastery of subtle resistance not through loud defiance, but through strategic silence, emotional resilience, and symbolic gestures that expose the contradictions of patriarchy. She is expected to perform loyalty to her husband and the state, but it is she who advises, interprets, and ultimately redirects the course of power.

Mehta also demonstrates that feminine power in Raj is expressed through endurance—an attribute often dismissed as passive but depicted here as a form of deep strength. Jaya’s ability to survive betrayal, loss, and political turmoil without surrendering her dignity becomes a mode of resistance. Her refusal to collapse under pressure is not compliance but defiance disguised as self-possession. Endurance becomes a shield, a strategy, and a voice.

In this sense, Mehta positions feminine assertiveness as relational rather than confrontational. Jaya’s political and emotional intelligence allows her to operate in interstitial spaces of authority, where she reshapes meaning without appearing to overthrow tradition. Her strength lies in transforming vulnerability into insight, making her a figure who redefines the boundaries of feminine agency.

Ultimately, Raj argues that women’s power in patriarchal cultures is neither absent nor secondary—it is simply embedded, adaptive, and coded. Jaya’s life becomes a testament to the idea that constraint does not extinguish agency; instead, it alters its form. Feminine resistance in the novel unfolds as a series of layered assertions disguised as obedience, a transformation that reflects broader feminist concerns with rethinking power in non-Western contexts.

Modernity, transformation, and the pursuit of new selves

The entry of modernity into princely India is not merely a historical backdrop in Raj but a catalyst for personal transformation, particularly for women like Jaya who navigate the border between tradition and change. In Mehta’s narrative, modernity arrives unevenly—through education, political unrest, cross-cultural encounters, evolving technologies, nationalist movements, and shifting gender consciousness. Jaya becomes a site where the inherited codes of Kshatriya aristocracy confront modern ideals of individuality, citizenship, and feminist autonomy. The result is neither a complete abandonment of tradition nor an uncritical embrace of Western modernity, but a self-conscious reconstruction of identity.

Modernity is frequently represented in the novel as an ideological threat by patriarchal structures—fathers, priests, palace advisors, and even husbands—who fear that modern learning, mobility, and political participation will destabilize the very foundations of princely authority. Yet this instability becomes the condition that enables Jaya’s transformation. As Bhatnagar (2023) emphasizes,

“modernity does not replace tradition, but it reframes the conditions under which tradition is interpreted.”

Jaya does not reject her heritage; instead, she reinterprets it, ultimately transforming her ceremonial princesshood into a platform for both political and personal agency.

By adulthood, Jaya is already shaped by competing worldviews: dynastic loyalty, karmic duty, democratic ideals, and feminist self-assertion. Her marriage—initially a continuation of patriarchal control—becomes one of the earliest arenas where modernity confronts traditional expectations. When her husband treats her as a decorative

symbol rather than an intellectual equal, her dissatisfaction is not solely emotional but ideological. As she later reflects,

“Education had not taught me obedience, but the rules of power”(Mehta, Raj)

This internal conflict becomes the turning point of her political awakening. Transformation begins not through rejection of the past but through its deliberate reinterpretation.

The pursuit of a new self is slow, layered, and often painful. Modernity offers the vocabulary of rights and self-determination but does not immediately grant access to these freedoms. Jaya occupies what postcolonial theorists describe as an “in-between” condition—neither fully enclosed by tradition nor entirely liberated by modernity. Leela Gandhi (1998) argues that such hybrid identities, often seen as incomplete, are precisely where postcolonial agency emerges. Jaya’s strength lies in refusing to choose between tradition and modernity; instead, she expands womanhood to encompass both ritual and critique, memory and reinvention.

Her transformation parallels India’s own shift from monarchy to democracy. As royal authority collapses and nationalist politics rise, Jaya recognizes that survival requires reinvention. No longer satisfied with ornamental power, she claims agency through public participation—representing people, advocating for reforms, and giving voice to women’s experiences. In this way, her evolution subverts both colonial and indigenous patriarchal narratives. Jaya becomes neither the obedient princess that tradition demands nor the Westernized figure colonial discourse imagines; she emerges as a postcolonial feminist subject who discovers agency through negotiation rather than rupture.

Modernity also transforms Jaya’s interior life. It empowers her to articulate desire, question marital expectations, reject emotional suppression, and imagine a life beyond royal destiny. This psychological movement—from passive endurance to active self-respect—is one of the most significant transformations in the novel. As Kumar (2023) observes, Jaya’s journey represents “a passage from role to identity, from silence to articulation.” Her modernity is not defined by Western habits but by reclaiming the right to narrate her own life.

By the end of Raj, modernity reshapes not only Jaya but the concept of royalty itself. Power ceases to reside in jewels, palaces, and titles; it becomes rooted in consciousness, voice, and participation. The princess who once embodied tradition reenters society as a modern Indian woman—someone who carries history without being confined by it. She becomes, in effect, what the novel itself performs: a bridge between eras, identities, and forms of authority.

Thus, the pursuit of new selves in Raj reveals the complexity of modernity in late colonial India. The modern Indian woman is shown not as a break from history nor as a passive product of it, but as an active author of her own becoming—someone who synthesizes both tradition and transformation to construct a self beyond confinement.

Endurance, self-respect, and subjectivity

The theme of endurance in Raj acquires deeper resonance through Mehta’s portrayal of the Maharani, whose daily rituals become a powerful metaphor for feminine resilience. Her actions reveal that endurance is neither passive nor incidental; rather, it is a cultivated discipline that allows royal women to sustain dignity under immense psychological and political pressure. Mehta illustrates this through the Maharani’s predawn visits to the Temple of the Balmer Maharanis, where she seeks communion with the ancestral spirits. As the narrative records,

“The Maharani rose before dawn and went to the Temple of the Balmer Maharanis to sit in solitary communion with the spirits of her predecessors... The knowledge of continuity in those dark hours gave the Maharani a serenity which sustained her through the deprivation she witnessed daily.” (p. 70).

This moment underscores that endurance, for women in Raj, emerges from a profound sense of historical continuity. The Maharani’s strength is not drawn from external political authority but from an inherited spiritual lineage that offers emotional stability in times of crisis. Such endurance becomes an ethical stance—an internal anchor that preserves self-respect even when external structures seek to diminish female agency.

Mehta further expands this idea through descriptions of the Maharani’s public responsibilities, which she fulfills with unwavering composure despite emotional strain and physical hardship. The narrative depicts her as a figure of disciplined compassion:

“When her pujas, her devotions, were completed, the Maharani watched... as her husband mounted his horse... Occasionally she held an assembly, a durbar, for refugee women... The lanterns, almost hidden by haloes of buzzing insects, had to be placed at a distance so their heat would not add to the intolerable closeness of the night.” (p. 71).

This passage reveals the dual nature of her endurance: private spiritual discipline and public emotional labor. By holding durbars for displaced women, she transforms her personal endurance into socially meaningful action. Her devotion, ritual practice, and empathetic governance collectively demonstrate that endurance is not a constraint but a deliberate ethical choice—an assertion of feminine subjectivity within a patriarchal world.

In this way, Mehta reframes endurance as a form of inner sovereignty. Through ritual, compassion, and dignified silence, the Maharani exemplifies how self-respect is maintained not by rejecting traditional roles but by inhabiting them with consciousness and purpose. Her character becomes a precursor to Jaya's later evolution: both women cultivate agency through a steady, often invisible strength that resists patriarchal erasure. Endurance, therefore, emerges as a deeply political and transformative force—one that sustains subjectivity and fortifies identity across generations of royal women in Raj.

Conclusion

Gita Mehta's *Raj* stands as a complex literary map of gender, power, and national identity, where the personal and political constantly intersect. Through the character of Jaya, Mehta reimagines the archetype of the Indian royal woman—not as a passive ornament of tradition but as a thinking, acting political subject whose journey reflects the transformation of India itself. Jaya's evolution from an obedient princess to a politically conscious leader disrupts conventional historiography, which often positions women as secondary to male-centric nationalist and monarchical narratives.

The central conflict in *Raj*—between tradition and modernity—does not resolve as a simplistic rejection of the past or blind adoption of the new. Instead, Mehta demonstrates that meaningful empowerment lies in the reinterpretation of cultural inheritance. Jaya adopts the dignity and discipline of royal legacy, but rejects the oppressive logic that once silenced women. Her identity becomes a bridge between eras—a woman shaped by history yet capable of reshaping history in return.

The novel further illuminates the workings of indirect power, where women in patriarchal societies navigate influence through language, ritual, diplomacy, and performance. Jaya's political agency emerges not through rebellion alone but through negotiation, resilience, and strategic reinterpretation of her role—echoing real historical women who operated within limited frameworks but altered those frameworks over time.

Ultimately, *Raj* expands the discourse on Indian womanhood beyond binaries of the domestic/public, tradition/modernity, and silence/voice. Mehta suggests that women's liberation is not the abandonment of heritage but the critical reclamation of it. Jaya's story becomes both a symbolic and material enactment of resistance, proving that the struggle for gendered selfhood is as political as any nationalist revolution.

In contextualizing Jaya within the larger landscape of colonialism, nationalism, and aristocratic decline, the novel foregrounds how gender is deeply implicated in the making of modern India. Mehta's work thus participates in feminist historiography by repositioning women not just as witnesses of history but as its agents and authors. As such, *Raj* remains a significant literary intervention into discussions of power, representation, and identity in postcolonial Indian writing.

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