



A Female Trauma: Theoretical Inquiry Of Modesty, Compliance And Stratification In Anjana Appachana's *Listening Now*

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ABSTRACT

The culturally stratified ideals of modesty, and compliance codify female experiences that women have been burring under their skin silently through emotional restraint, and curtailed aspiration. The novel *Listening Now* analogously operates on series of event that adequately delineate the structural codes embedded within familial obligation and gendered socialization that stratify certain conventions of conduct and decorum intending to marginalize women and to cause in them neurotic aches that traumatize women's everyday survival and existence within the family and society. Through narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, silence, and fragmented memory, Appachana renders women's interior lives as sites of both suffering and resistance in the contemporary Indian Society.

Drawing on feminist theory articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, alongside Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma, and various theorists, the present study will scrutinise the key female characters in the novel by employing feminist and trauma-theoretical frameworks to analyse how such norms produce sustained forms of psychological distress that are frequently normalized within domestic and social spaces.

Keywords: Stratification, Trauma Studies/Theories, Indian Culture, Female trauma.

The diversified Indian culture has been common at the social pedestals to idealise women in serene images. However, when it casts women into requisite social mantles, it consciously reframes her with codes of modesty to design her into a moral image that are often structured through a disciplinary regime paved through and curbed by class, caste, kinship, family honour, and patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, such modesty operates not as an individual moral choice of women, but operates to regulate female voices, sexuality, and desires, that silently function as a visible marker of respectability which secures their legitimacy within familial and social hierarchies. Women compliant with such codes of modesty are compelled to abide with the internalized expectations to sustain domestic arrangement and social continuity.

Such compliances are structurally enforced to subjugate the women entering marriage, however, the girls under the domestic set up aren't less quelled in perpetuating the family repute, presumed to be sustained and endured underneath the female vassalage. The family bond is made contingent upon women's self-erasure for the stratified roles performed aligning the exclusive social decorum called female modesty. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity extensively delves upon such stratification, rooted in duality of social standards than in biological attributes, which may serve as a tool to perceive the discriminatory binaries of family dynamics reinforced upon female modesty, social compliance and gender stratifications, as Butler contends,

"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender..." (Butler 33)

Judith Butler's gender performativity becomes instructive for analysing gender stratification, as gender is constituted through the repetitive enactment of socially constructed norms that come to appear natural; however, through this process, the unequal power relations between genders are normalized and sustained. Modesty and obedience, therefore, do not originate as innate feminine qualities but are produced through

sustained performative repetition. These acts sediment into cultural norms that render gender inequality natural, inevitable and prerequisite, thereupon thus normalize unequal power relations while concealing their constructed and coercive foundations.

In Appachana's *Listening Now*, these gender-stratified compliances manifested in Padma's silence, Anuradha's docility, and Madhu's relentless self-interrogation, Shanta's turmoil and Rukmini's life. Underneath such outward conformity, however, lies a trauma— the psychic wounds that are induced by suppression, alienation, and thwarted desire. Cathy Caruth conceptualizes such trauma as an “unclaimed experience,” one that resists narrative assimilation and instead re-emerges through compulsive and haunting repetition (Caruth 4). Appachana's characters embody these paradoxes as their lives are governed by performative silence, yet their narratives testify to the suppressed grief of women in modern India, where modesty and compliance simultaneously mask and reproduce enduring trauma. The ongoing effort of what Butler calls “repeated stylization” gives rise to the “unclaimed experience” that Caruth describes as trauma. Trauma, then, is not caused by a single disruptive event but develops as the cumulative burden of sustained performative compliance. The lives of the leading female characters in the novel reflect the dual consciousness of women negotiating between traditions and the denial of recognition and identity. Their rights and voice are structurally suppressed and so do the space of their own to exist as they are for themselves and not for any stratified assigned roles. Nevertheless, Spivak's aptly invite a general gaze toward the women subalternity to what she observes, that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak 308), Appachana's women in the novel are instances of what Spivak mention, i.e., all women are structurally silenced within patriarchal discourse. The present novel at the examination, however, stages to expose these silences, unveiling the long inconspicuous predicaments of women often disguised under the varied social praxis. The novel digs out the prevailing standard mechanisms working to marginalize and suppress women, where unmediated voice is impossible.

The novel joins the long-fought battle brawled through literary traditions called feminism and thus foregrounds the quandary of women's inner lives, friendships, and existential struggles. *Appachana's* discourse validate and relate aptly to the Beauvoir's claim that woman is socially constructed as “Other” (Beauvoir 267) and complement to it by her observation that women are often confined to immanence, domestic and socially prescribed roles, while men are granted transcendence. Appachana's characters, are strangled by expectations of marriage, motherhood, and familial duty, exemplify this dynamic. By fusing stream of consciousness with realist ingredients, Appachana's narrative opens, both intimate and social - a can of worms. Her characters' estrangement reflects not merely personal grief but cultural trauma, where modesty and compliance perpetuate psychic wounds across generations.

Listening Now intricately unfolds through the intensely personal worlds of seven female characters. The personal account of protagonist Mallika sets up the reader within a periphery marked by grief, silence, establishing absence and emotional repression as formative conditions of her childhood,

“In that deep and distant time, there lived in my house my permanently grief-stricken mother, my mother's vivacious, laughing sister, and my absent father, whose presence in our house was shaped by my grieving mother's awful silence. Our house was like a well, holding his absence and her silence, and within those waters my story began” (Appachana 3).

Mallika's voice, poised between grief and fantasy, that transforms her domestic space into a site of miserable existential testimony. What appears as modesty, which is advent through Padma's refusal to speak and her compliance with cultural codes of silence, is revealed as a wound, a stratified gender expectation that presses upon the daughter as much as the mother. The novel's opening cadence a pattern of absence and presence, speech and silence, and grief and survival etc which in due course. Silence is never empty; it is saturated with memory of trauma, and the unspoken age-old pangs of women, whose lives are shaped by compliance yet marked by unattained resistance. The house of under the critical gaze of this study, however, reverberates with this absence such resistance, each echo of Padma's grief shaping Mallika's earliest sense of self. The laughter of her aunt, bright and fleeting, only sharpens the contrast, illustrating how joy and sorrow coexist coincide within the same domestic sphere. The dominance of the absent father is so that even when spectral than real, becomes a presence precisely through his absence, defined further by the silences surrounding him. Mallika's life is haunted by the shadow of her absent father, which is contrived through Padma's “awful silences,” that erupt in the “unrelenting heat of revelation and then another and yet another, coming up one after the other” (Appachana 1). These silences are culturally coded as modesty and compliance, stratify Mallika's childhood, separate her from due affection and shape her earliest sense of self. Here, silence functions not as passive absence but as an active, regulatory force, perpetuating trauma across generations and producing the conditions for both psychic constraint and resistance.

As a child brimming with imagination, Mallika finds a substitute for her desires in fantasy and cultivates friendships with Prabha, Mahima, and Gauri as counterweights to the loneliness that pervades her mother's life. Mallika's friendships exert on a microcosmic scale, enabling her to navigate through the familial and social constraints. Concomitantly, Padma's unsuccessful inter caste love illustrates how stratification operates across multiple axes — within the family, across caste, and through gendered expectations — constraining her personal desire. The ripples of trauma of Padma's thwarted relationship reverberates in Mallika's life, escalate her sensitivity towards her social behaviour and underscore that compliance is not merely individual but structured by entrenched societal norms. The burden of Padma's silence — her refusal to speak of Mallika's father or her

own thwarted love — leaves a lasting whack on Mallika's consciousness. Padma's inefficacy to fulfil maternal duties forces Mallika to seek refuge under Shanta's care, where she experiences a sense of maternal normalcy. Nancy Chodorow argues that "because women remain primary caregivers, mother–daughter relationships reproduce expectations of nurturance, relationality, and self-sacrifice across generations" (Chodorow 1978). Through a psychoanalytic feminist lens, this framework calls attention to the way the mother–daughter bond becomes a site where trauma, compliance, and gendered expectations are transmitted across generations. Mallika's trajectory thus embodies the paradox at the heart of Appachana's novel, where modesty and compliance appear as virtues but function as disciplinary forces, stratifying women's lives and perpetuating perennial trauma that govern the ways within women are subjugated. Though Mallika, the leading character of the novel, resists these forces through a displaced substitute, like imagination, friendship, and maternal substitution to her censored desires. Her efforts result in silence transformed into testimony and grief into a pursuit of agency.

Madhu's character, however, is carefully distinguished from other women as she, unlike the other female characters, outwardly maintains cordial relations, appears friendly and helpful, and enjoys the privileges of wealth. She is not weighed down as Anuradha by domestic burdens, nor as visibly insecure or emotionally wounded as Padma. Yet beneath this surface lies profound loneliness. Madhu becomes a victim of social disparity and inner turmoil, her personality marked by self-obsession and relentless self-interrogation. She is constrained in her pursuit of authenticity, caught between the desire to live fully and the compulsion to conform to societal expectations. Her sense of incompleteness as a wife prompts obsessive self-critique:

"She found herself lingering over little details, she found herself going back obsessively to past incidents, sometimes she felt her insides becoming so knotted that she wanted to scream. She hated herself then. Look at Anu, she would tell herself...how she works from morning to night. Look at Padma, all alone, so alone, and look how much she has to work to secure for herself and her daughter. Neither of them complains. They have more to be angry about, not you, think of them and be satisfied. But her unruly mind would not listen" (Appachana 84)

Madhu's inner turmoil exemplifies the disciplinary force of compliance. She measures herself against other women, internalizing patriarchal expectations that stratify lives into hierarchies of suffering. Butler's theory of gender performativity demonstrates how gender norms are produced through the repetitive enactment of socially regulated behaviours, which over time acquire the appearance of natural gender roles and sustain unequal power relations (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). Madhu's comparisons with Padma and Anuradha reveal this process as she devalues her own suffering because it does not align with socially recognized standards of trauma. Madhu's mother reinforces the cultural script of modesty, urging her to "sublimate desires",

"Beti, Listen, you have to learn to do without. One day our marriage will require you to do it without thinking; remember, marriage is not song and dance like the films you want to see, marriage means sublimating your desires, so learn to do that now" (Appachana 82-83)

This instruction is not merely maternal advice but a reflection of gendered stratification within marriage. The daughter is taught to internalize deprivation as virtue, equating silence and sacrifice with respectability. Such rhetoric naturalizes patriarchal hierarchies, positioning women as custodians of family honour while men retain freedom to pursue ambition and desire. Marriage thus operates as a site of disciplinary power: modesty and compliance are valorised, while female agency is curtailed. Madhu's husband further enforces this compliance by trivializing her educational aspirations:

"Yesterday only I told Him, I think I will complete my B.A.....and he laughed and said, B.A., She-A, Ph.D., T-hd, what will you do with it? You are a wife, you are a mother, That is a full-time job..." (Appachana 61)

Her pursuit of education, which shall be the basic and innate right to any, has been dismissed. Contrary, her individuality is reduced to domestic roles, and her existence hierarchized according to patriarchal valuation. Madhu's contradictions, generous in spending yet proves to be inadequate and defenceless before her husband; outwardly compliant yet internally restless reveal the deep neurotic strain within her psyche. She suffers for the neglect of health during her pregnancy exemplifies the embodied trauma of compliance, where women's bodies are subordinated to the obligations of marriage and motherhood.

Anuradha's character is delineated as a docile woman within a typical Indian middle-class household, who has been compelled to prioritize the needs of her family even at the cost of her own necessities. However, it is advent in patriarchy she has to succumb at the instruction of her husband. She is ordered to reduce expenses, to which she submits mutely without showing a sign of protest.

"She gave up her nightly glass of milk and stopped taking ghee in her food, stopped eating fruits and set less dahi because she didn't eat dahi. She stopped having sugar in her tea except in the morning — that she still had, that she looked forward to his return from the office. She dispensed with the dhobi..." (Appachana 121-122)

However, what is distressful is her deprivation, that largely remains unnoticed and normal by her own family. Her labour persists unrecognized and devalued and so does her existential identity erased in her own house by her own people. Her sacrifices are systematically thus subordinated to her male counterpart who can claim everything they wish and desire. It is the social stratification that operates on gender biasedness which renders women's every existential trust neglected within the intersecting hierarchies perpetuated under the patriarchy and caste. Sharmila Rege aptly argues against the insufficiency of feminist politics that largely remain inattentive to address the issues social characters like Anuradha suffer every day and are conflicted in routine homely atmosphere that often denies them to let them feel at her home. She appeals feminist politics must

move beyond merely “naming difference” or celebrating a “different voice” and instead examine the social relations that transform difference into structured oppression. (S. “.–1. Rege) Nevertheless, Anuradha faces constant criticism by mother-in-law’s, who herself is woman, despite her awareness to Anuradha’s docility. Her Mother-in-law’s silent endurance supplies misunderstandings with her husband that further victimizes her of self-erasure, making her impotent to articulate her needs with her expectations to her partner. Contrary, with her every attempt humiliation surface at inappropriate moments. This failure of communication distances her further from her spouse, underscoring how modesty and compliance, valorised as feminine virtues, function as disciplinary forces that stratify women’s lives and perpetuate trauma.

Through these female characters - Anuradha, Madhu, and Shanta, Padma’s elder sister, Appachana conveys the emotional and social toll on married women who are compelled to sacrifice themselves, while performing duties as mothers and housewives without a care for their selves. Shanta embodies the frustration of wasted potential, who is Trapped in loneliness, and is resentful. Her overwhelming emotional intensity rather generates profound inner conflict if not relieve her. Since her adolescence, she struggled to find her place within her extended family and social circle, and her solitude amplified her pervasive sense of estrangement, highlighting the intergenerational and structural dimensions women like her are oppressed by. Thus, Shanta, who is Padma’s elder sister, exemplifies the psychological and social cost of constrained female aspiration in urban India. Her dreams for a contented married life are modest yet reveal the tragedy of their denial. When asked by her brother what she wanted in life, she happily responds her dreams and future aspirations, “I wanted to go to college, then get married to a nice man with a good job, have a large house and garden and have two children” (Appachana 214)

This reaction underscores how ordinary ambitions are circumscribed by familial and societal expectations. Shanta, however, is trapped in domesticity, withdraws into isolation, though tries to find retreat into the bathroom where she attempts to pursue personal interests, a space- simultaneously of confinement and potential self-expression. Hélène Cixous’ concept of **écriture féminine** clarifies this tension that asserts, “women’s writing, imagination, or interior monologues resist patriarchal structures by giving form to otherwise silenced experiences” (Cixous 875) Shanta’s seclusion and fantasy function as a textual and psychological resistance, articulating her subjectivity within the confines imposed by marriage and family. Shanta’s constant negotiation between her desires and obligations demonstrates the personal cost of internalized social ethics; her care for family, while socially valorised, comes at the expense of her emotional and intellectual autonomy. Shanta’s silence, compliance, and self-effacement are not mere personal traits but the embodied result of cultural conditioning that enforces patriarchal hierarchies. Appachana’s depiction of Shanta aligns with the broader socio-cultural reality of urban India, where women’s aspirations are often curtailed by familial, social, and patriarchal pressures. Shanta’s trajectory exemplifies how even urban, ostensibly privileged women experience stratification of ambition, where emotional and financial independence remain constrained by societal expectation. The narrative underscores the urgency of addressing these patterns in contemporary India, emphasizing that personal growth and agency are structurally mediated, yet essential for the formation of autonomous subjectivity.

Padma’s life in *Listening Now* exemplifies the psychological and social consequences of constrained female agency in urban India. Through Appachana’s use of stream of consciousness in deft, her narrative technique she employs in this novel exposes the complex interplay of personal desire, societal norms, and familial pressures. Initially nurtured by parental love and sibling support. Padma remains unexposed to the strictures of social morality until her relationship with Karan. Her love and subsequent pregnancy are violently interrupted when Karan marries another woman, leaving Padma estranged, lonely, and psychologically fractured. This trauma is rendered with visceral intensity,

“It was death without him, her own. The pain, a monster inhabiting her body, imprisoned in her flesh, growing larger than her. Eating her brain, chewing off her tongue, swallowing her eyes, gnawing off her ears” (Appachana 330)

Padma’s trauma, both psychic and social, cannot fully be expressed but does continually shape her experiences, particularly her relationship with her daughter, Mallika. As an unwed mother, Padma enacts as a socially sanctioned identity of widowhood, concealing her illegitimacy from society. This performative act resonates with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Her widowhood is thus not an internalized truth but a socially scripted performance, enacted to attain legitimacy while circumscribing her autonomy. The eventual encounter with Karan, culminating in loveless sex after thirteen years, signals a constrained assertion of agency—a rebellion shaped by systemic and familial pressures. Padma’s trauma extends intergenerationally, profoundly shaping Mallika’s consciousness. Even at the age of three, Mallika perceives her mother’s silences as a disciplinary force,

“I knew my mother’s silence, Even at three I knew it worse than her weeping...This was the silence which excluded me completely. There was more terror in this than all Ma’s tears” (Appachana 8)

Moreover, Padma’s inability to fulfil maternal ideals, shaped by structural, relational, and cultural pressures—impacts Mallika’s emotional evolution. Yet Padma’s relational ethics extend beyond her daughter, to her friendships with Madhu and Anuradha, that symbolically emphasize female solidarity as a counterpoint to patriarchal isolation. As Bell Hooks observes, “such bonds provide women with spaces of care, emotional resilience, and subtle resistance” (hooks). Padma emerges as a complex figure shaped by patriarchal constraints, relational trauma, and socially scripted gender norms. Her life underscores the psychological toll

of compliance and lost aspiration, demonstrating how urban Indian women, despite relative privilege, experience systemic subjugation. Appachana's narrative, through interiority, bodily suffering, and intergenerational effects, positions Padma as both a site of critique and a testament to resilience. Her anxiety is intensified by obsessive thoughts of losing Mallika, is dramatized through her stream-of-consciousness narration, where every conceivable catastrophe becomes a potential punishment. Her despair reaches a point of utter hopelessness,

"I want to die, I want to die. ... She had cried it out *against* her child, *against* her demands, *against* her love. Not once, but night after night after night, she and Mallika weeping in loud unison, Amma, Amma, Ma, Ma. Not wanting Mallika, without whom she couldn't live; not wanting Mallika's demands, without which she wouldn't have survived; not wanting Mallika's love, without which she would have curled up and died." (Appachana 225)

This paradox, her dependence on Mallika's presence alongside resentment for her demands, reveals the psychic trauma of motherhood. Padma's estrangement exemplifies a tension between culture against the self, demonstrating how maternal expectations can conflict with personal desire within the Indian cultural context. The narrative reaches its climax with the introduction of Rukmini, Padma's mother, whose life embodies the systemic exploitation of women through child marriage.

"Married at fourteen, a mother at sixteen, three children, in- numerable miscarriages, a womb that never stopped bleeding, a tumor within that grew and grew and grew and poisoned her body because the doctor said she was imagining the pain. Out with the tumor, out with the womb. All before she was thirty. And before she was forty, out the others came tumbling, her grandchildren, one after the other after the other..." (Appachana 350).

Rukmini, thus married at very young age, and became mother at sixteen, therefore, her body is ravaged by miscarriages and medical neglect.

Men are equally responsible for making women miserable and vulnerable. Karan, Padma's lover, exemplifies the constrained agency of Indian middle-class men whose desires are subordinated to parental authority, resulting in the destruction of both his and Padma's happiness. Karan's mother, as an enforcer of patriarchal norms, demonstrates how women themselves can perpetuate compliance, controlling the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour. Prema, Karan's wife, although less developed in Appachana's narrative, functions as a symbol of socially sanctioned femininity, legitimizing patriarchal structures. He is an embodiment of the contradictions of the Indian middle-class male, whose desires are subordinated to familial and societal expectations. His failure to honour his relationship with Padma demonstrates how patriarchal structures dictate not only women's but also men's behaviours, reinforcing a cause of systemic trauma. Though portrayed as intelligent and responsible, Karan's compliance with his mother's authority and his eventual marriage to Prema reveal how middle-class men navigate obligations at the cost of personal and relational ethics. His actions directly exacerbate Padma's psychic and social suffering, highlighting how male compliance with social norms perpetuates stratification: he becomes both agent and instrument of patriarchal control.

In Indian context, where cultural expectations hold high value and meant to be achieved above everything. However, when certain cultural obligations attained at the sacrifice of female desire and her right to exist normal and with prestige, It is often observed that women join the men in suppressing these desires and aspirations. Karan's mother operates as a key agent of patriarchal enforcement. She actively obstructs Padma and Karan's union, prioritizing family honor and social propriety over individual happiness. Karan's mother's authority shapes the trajectory of Padma's life, rendering her desires illegitimate and reinforcing intergenerational cycles of compliance and silencing. By imposing moral boundaries on her son, she illustrates how social conditioning transforms women into enforcers of gendered obedience, producing collateral trauma for other women.

In synthesizing these dynamics, Appachana's narrative demonstrates that the trauma experienced by women is rarely isolated to individual relationships. Instead, it is reinforced through relational compliance, societal expectation, and patriarchal stratification — producing a cycle where modesty and obedience are valorised, even when they generate profound psychological suffering. The predicament of the leading characters exemplifies how patriarchal structures operate multilaterally, illustrating the complex interdependencies that sustain trauma across genders and generations. Indian youth is struggling not just with patriarchy but with the arches of modesty and compliance, growing up in the fear of losing loved ones at the cost of choosing what they truly desire. Most people do not notice these apprehensive social norms that often take precedence over individual emotional needs. This rigidity and fear of stepping out of comfort zones push many into constant silence and mindless scrolling. Working on Appachana and reading her characters set prior to the 2000s makes them more perennial, as the inner notions of middle-class Indian strata remain largely unchanged.

Particularly, Appachana's women navigate their lives through duties, desires, and relational expectations that illuminates how compliance and modesty are internalized across generations. The psychic burden of these inherited norms manifested as anxiety, self-censorship, and heightened sensitivity to social judgment. The relational dynamics in the novel indicate that the challenges of negotiating personal identity within social structures are not confined to historical contexts; rather, they persist in modern middle-class Indian life. Thus, through the trauma theoretical lens within a gender discourse, Appachana's narrative offers a framework to understand how cultural prescriptions of modesty and compliance continue to shape agency, relationships, and emotional wellbeing among younger generations.

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