

STANDING AT THE THRESHOLD: IN AND OUT OF THE HAVELI

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Abstract:

Inside the Haveli by Rama Mehta and *Gulabi Talkies* by Vaidehi are two interesting accounts of life in two different genres of Indian English Literature, which explore the topography of the world of the women. These works deftly weave modernity into the lives of women which creates a mosaic of varied expressions and experiences of gender, identity and femininity. The vista of society they project contain in them, the waves of tradition and modernity. The authors and their predicament add color to their artistic creations.

Index Terms – Indian writing in English, Reading Women Writing, Gendered Spaces, Tradition and Modernity

As a medium of expression, writing tries to encompass all our experiences, taking the aid of language. The selection of language may obviously vary in a multi-lingual country like India. Our experiences surpass all its “barriers” and explore spaces. The Indian literature in the multitudes of languages and in English consist a unity in experience. Focusing on Indian English literature and shifting our attention to the reading of women writing, we find that women also have internalized the English language and have tried to vocalize their experiences, thoughts, ideas and opinions. The Sahitya Academy Award winning novel, *Inside the Haveli* (1977) by Rama Mehta and *Gulabi Talkies*, short story in Kannada (Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana to English) by Vaidehi, Sahitya Academy award winning author too have vocalized their ideas of gender spaces and topography, identity and the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. It is interesting to note that these two texts speak of topography inside and outside the four walls in the life of women. There is a strong deep rooted traditional haveli in one, whereas there stands a deep rooted age old dhoopa tree in the other as cultural symbols. Modernity seeps into these two worlds through small waves which create a mosaic in the lives of people inhabiting the haveli while affecting through the cinema in the other.

Inside the Haveli (1977) is the story of Geeta, an independent, educated, spirited girl, who marries into a conventional family in Udaipur. The conservative and rigid norms of life in the haveli leave her wondering to herself of her identity and space in the organized chaos of the haveli that belonged to Sangram Singhji. The novel with its elaborate descriptions provides us a slice of the life in an aristocratic Rajasthani household. The genre gives the author space to explore into Udaipur,

“...once the capital of the State of Mewar; now it is only a town like many other towns in Rajasthan” (Mehta 3).

What is most interesting is the title, *Inside the Haveli*. ‘Haveli’ is very much authentic to Rajasthan and it stands as a portmanteau for all the cultural and traditional values of that specific cultural space. Its magnificence and intricacies leave people in fascination. Anything we awe at is mysterious. In Haveli, we see the intersection of space and gender. It gives a clear distinction of places/spaces with its exclusive zenana, mardana, courtyards, narrow stairways, pathways, niches, windows, and high raised walls. Priyanka Sacheti in “*Navigating and Re-writing the Gendered Space in a Haveli*” notices,

“A top sociologist, lecturer, and novelist, her writings included *The Western Educated Hindu Woman*, *The Hindu Divorced Woman*, and *From Purdah to Modernity*. One of the first women to be appointed to India’s Foreign Service, Rama Mehta was forced to resign her position upon marriage.” (Feminismindia.com)

This points at Mehta’s protagonist in *Inside the Haveli*, Geeta who “did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women”, (Mehta 3) when she was married to Ajay. Even though Ajay was well educated and was a professor, his progressive thinking was always in conflict with his deep

rooted traditional values. With all its varied exuberance of life, Rama Mehta is successful in doing a sociological and psychological study of the life of people 'Inside the Haveli'.

Writing from the perspective of a tradition - bound modern woman, Rama Mehta tries to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity that are always in conflict with one another. The title of the novel followed by the direct entry into the city of Udaipur is a dyad. 'Inside' lies the Zenana, the world of the women which implicitly segregates it from the world of the Mardana, the world of the men. This issue of the inside/outside dyad provides the author to explore the topography of women's life inside the haveli. The enclosed spaces inside the haveli, purdah the women wore symbolize the claustrophobia in the mind of the protagonist and also in the minds of other women.

"The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within their apartments. The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. Even so no man entered the courtyard without being properly announced." (Mehta 6)

This strict governance and rigid etiquette creates high walls between people and different worlds.

"There is no way they can look into the courtyards; the windows are so high that no one can look through them. The town people leave the old city, without fathomed what goes on the inside men's and women's apartments of the haveli." (Mehta 5)

On one hand, the tradition is pitched with modernity and a balance is sought while on the other hand the issues and concerns remain inside the haveli and the world boils down to mere separate apartments of men and women.

Gulabi Talkies with its ambit as a short story introduces the "town with only one street running through it, like a hair parting. Some large houses, some small houses, all that it needed to be called a town - some shop-fronts, a government office, a small school, a bus stand, a few deodar and casuarina trees." (Vaidehi 1). The voice and the choice of words both hint at the possible narrative style of the story. Similar to that of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, Vaidehi too begins with the topography of the town, which plays an important role in creating the spaces in the minds of the inhabitants of the town. She is very clear about her people in the story. She is sure when she writes:

"In this town where the world of men and the world of women existed side by side but separately..." (Vaidehi 1)

This statement is justified earlier when the author describes the various chores specific to men and women of that town. Women here are in a world of their own which has its set of activities. These activities are the clear markers of gender identity. Men went *out* of the threshold while women stayed *inside*.

"The town had an open ground where in the evenings men went for a walk or to sit down with their friends and speak of the war which was over and of the war that might possibly be waged in the future. They talked about the rain and they discussed over and over the schoolmaster who tried to 'spoil' a girl even in that transparent town." (Vaidehi 1)

Women were contended with the chores of the household. They never rested. One chore after another kept them busy all day. These work become mundane and tiresome.

"By the time evening came, the women would have sent the children out to play, combed their hair, applied kumkum on their forehead, placed a string of jasmine or suruli flowers on their hair - knot and relaxed a little - or they sat around preparing the jackfruit leaf containers for the next day's steamed kadubu, or grinding rice and urad dal, or stringing flowers. When they saw the sun go down, they lit the lamp and sang bhajans, clapping their hands to keep time." (Vaidehi 1)

This world of women which was separate was always guarded by the male member of the house. Women themselves feared going out.

"It was not the custom for women to go to this open ground. They didn't even go out into the street by themselves. The home was considered enough for them!" (Vaidehi 2)

Tradition binds women to their world. They require a company to go out into the world outside, which originally is not theirs. This notion is challenged when the dhoopa tree is cut down. *"When the axe blows started falling on the dhoopa tree which had spread itself like a great-grandfather, the entire town came to see what would happen."* This act attracts many questions and criticisms but many are happy that a talikes would come to their town. This act

“created a small revolution in the world of the town’s women.” (Vaidehi 8) Vaidehi is a keen observer of her society. She is deft when she remarks,

“Not everyone felt happy. There was no dearth of older people who thought that watching the ‘talkies’ would spoil the entire town, especially the women. But whose rule prevails when the town begins to grow? If one listened to such talk this town would still have been in the forest. ‘Wealthy women have midwives, but who looks after the forest creatures as they give birth?’ These words of the daasas would not have been uttered then.” (Vaidehi 14)

Talkies bring about a lot many changes in the life of the town, especially into the world of women. “Talkies” here becomes a very strong metaphor for modernity. The changes in the life of women were just a matter of observation. Midwife Lillibai’s attitude changes towards her work and she takes up the job as a ticket collector at the talkies gate, new fashions in clothing, gait and speech of women changed, ornaments of brides, lullabies were replaced by film song and “everything was touched by the breeze of the cinema”. (Vaidehi 14)

Vaidehi’s women characters finally after the emergence of the cinema start moving out of the four walls of the house. This movement out of the threshold is questioned by the authoritative male figures of the family but Vaidehi’s women have learnt to answer those questions.

“The women of the town weren’t as afraid as they used to be. Neither were their hands as empty as before. They had become bold enough to say firmly that they were going to the cinema that evening. If the men barked at them, they would reply sharply as they continued to tie their hair in a bun, ‘Have we become unfit even to see a film? If we listen to everything you say, you’ll make us jump this way and that.’ And money? The women had learned to ask for enough for four tickets even when only three of them were going, and to save the money for a future occasion.”(Vaidehi 14)

The talkie which was built according to the wish of a lady named Gulabi not only is built on the place where the age old dhoopa tree stood but also created a revolution in the world of women.

“Though the wave arose in a teacup, it was a wave nevertheless... A wave once created only grows bigger and bigger; it can never recede.” (Vaidehi 14)

Although the subject matter of these two texts is varied, their concerns are similar and so are the quandaries of the characters they speak of. Geeta, a modern-educated girl tries to understand the tradition which binds her and accepts it while constantly trying to make certain amends when she seeks authority to speak for her daughter Vijay’s marriage and also when she seeks to educate the servant’s daughter Sita. There are scores of other women in Geeta’s world who are bound and rooted in the tradition that they are reluctant to changes. Men, like the photographs in the mardana are awed at and revered as figures of authority. Rama Mehta though a progressive woman, had to quit her job after marriage. This very aspect is reflected in Geeta when she finally becomes the new mistress of the haveli after the death of her father-in-law. An advice or better put awareness dawns on Geeta, “You can’t forget its traditions in your sorrow.”(Mehta 264)

Gulabi, though a character responsible for the talkies, is not much of importance. But it is through her that other women like Lillibai dream of moving out into the world outside. In spite of being a homemaker (not a working woman in corporate sense) and author Vaidehi’s characters seek to go out into the world. The world of men and women existed separately but in the end they seep into one another. It is very interesting to stand at the threshold and look in and out of the haveli that opens up a whole vista of possibilities. Pondering over varied perspectives sharpen our sensibilities.

These two texts are interesting accounts in two different genres of Indian English Literature, which explore the topography of the world of the women. They deftly weave modernity into the lives of women which creates a mosaic of varied expressions and experiences of gender, identity and femininity. The spectrum of society they project contain in them, the waves of tradition and modernity. The authors and their predicament too adds colour to their artistic creations which are interestingly opposite in nature.

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