

FROM DISENFRANCHISEMENT TO EMPOWERMENT IN RAMA MEHTA'S "INSIDE THE HAVELI": A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract:

The rise of Renaissance for education and emancipation of women can be traced to 19th century with women rising spiritually and psychologically. We can see Indian women writing in English rising with the tool of education for their empowerment. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* is an agreement and understanding of the paradoxical thoughts of traditional and modern. Mehta portrays an educated woman, Geeta who moves from modernity to conventional modes of life but finally succeeds to emerge as a self sufficient new woman. We can see similar kind of life in Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* that presents a realm of educated women fighting against the patriarchal system. The novels explore the journey of the protagonists that overcome their search for identity at the mental, social and physical level in the cross-cultural content.

Key words: Women Education, Patriarchy, Love, Marriage, New-Woman, Emancipation, Tradition, Modernity.

Introduction:

'Rama Mehta' (1923-1978) who was born in Nainital, India was one of the first women to be appointed for the foreign services. She was a sociologist, lecturer and a novelist. She gave up all of these professions and interests after her marriage. This article portrays the only novel for grown-ups **'Inside the Haveli'** (1977) that won the Sahitya Academy Award for Rama Mehta in 1979.

Identity occupies the central part of the novel showing the 'self' that has become a cliché without becoming clear. It has been evidently seen that this has also become the main theme of women's literature since 1920s. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find "*the woman's quest for self-definition the underlying plot of nineteenth century writing by women*" (Gilbert and Susan Gubar 76), while Elaine Showalter sees 'self-discovery' 'a search for identity' (Showalter 13).

The novel portrays modern thoughts and those that value traditional roots displaying the helplessness of the protagonist. While expressing the inclusion of modernization in the Haveli, the novel shows advanced thoughts towards peace, laying the foundations of traditions as well.

This novel like most of Mehta's other works discusses ways of dealing with ancient traditions and customs in the present age. The reconciliation of the protagonist with the myriad customs of the Haveli forms the plot of the novel. We can also find various celebrations associated with joint families that are finely documented in the novel. The novel projects a journey to give space for woman in the society. At the same time, it portrays a search of one's own authentic identity. The protagonist Geeta, displays a disgruntled self at war with the patriarchal and traditional modes of society. Geeta's personal voice among the collective asserts the autonomy of women. The novel is a journey that Geeta undertakes to overcome her search for her identity at the mental, social and physical levels.

Literature stands as a mirror of the society. We can consider 'Inside the Haveli' a hallmark piece trying to focus on this point and the artists are those that shape spirits of the same. The novel pens down the picture of the Haveli in Rajasthan and a seminal proof for the life style of the womenfolk. The novelist herself is a Rajasthani woman standing to witness the experience of the characters in the novel. The objective is to throw light on the inner struggle of the protagonist towards the optimism and the life style prevailing in the major characters in the novel. In the current pessimistic society, we all need to have a sense of adjustment propounded by our forefathers. The happenings in the novel contribute to enlighten and carry out the didactic elements of the novel. In other words, the novel puts forth love as the basic force in order to build a community of compromise.

The narrator's description highlights: *"Two years ago when she (Geeta) left her parents home in Bombay, she did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women"* (15).

Geeta's journey begins in Physical manner moving to Udaipur by train after her wedding with Ajay who happens to be an educated Science Professor with aristocratic norms. We can sense a movement from present to past and past to present exploring thus a journey the protagonist in fact needs. Mehta as a sociologist has taken sociological approach, *"the approach which starts with conviction that the relation of literature to society is vitally important"* (Scott 125).

'Haveli' suggests an ancient and huge dwelling place that has been in existence since generations. The preposition that is used, i.e. 'inside', also indicates that the events would only occur inside the Haveli, not outside it. True to this assessment, except for a few incidents, all the actions in the novel happen inside the novel. This fact allows one to think that the novel would host characters who feel trapped inside the novel, which is also true in the case of Geeta.

As Coser points out, *"fiction provides us with a wealth of sociologically relevant material. Literature, like sociology is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it"* (Coser 3)

Rama Mehta says that the approach which begins with conviction that the relation of literature to society is vitally important. (Scott 125)The novel unravels the classical clash between tradition and modernity with the description of two cities Udaipur and Bombay that stand for tradition and modernity respectively.

"In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli" (29). Vijayalakshmi Seshadri says, *"With the new women's writing starting in the 1970s, the conventional plot of the novel was replaced by the quest of the new heroine"* (Seshadri 60).

The structure of society and its system postulates the inside or outside dichotomy on mere basis of gender. In Inside the Haveli, this Inside is assigned only to women because women lack that space in society. Self exploration is present and apparent throughout the period of the contemporary women's writing, thus giving the heroine a questing status, liberating her from all the mythological and constraining stereotypes.

Uma Chakrawati in Patriarchy has pointed out that:

Women are seen as irredeemably weak, feckless and over-promiscuous. The social structure and practice of language itself naturalize notions of appropriate and inappropriate female behavior. A society lives by to be constructed rather than given and clearly authorized by systems of patriarchal powers. (Chakrawati 134)

Geeta finds the Haveli, Jeevan Nivas forbidding and huge. The Haveli is three hundred years old. The members of the Haveli try to maintain the traditions that have come down from these three centuries. The

Haveli thus is the central location of tradition and also forms the setting for all the quarrels, affection, marriages and deaths in the family. For women like Geeta, who are forced to stay in the confines of the Haveli, it becomes a prison. The pattern of the Haveli is unchanging. Every hour of the day is filled with things but they seem to have fallen into a routine. Even rest and entertainment have their own time slots. This indicates the rigid unchanging mindset of the people of the Haveli who follow customs without thinking. It is Geeta who changes this with her questions and engages the mind of others.

The name of the Haveli is ironic. ‘**Jeewan Nivas**’ generally means the house of others. But for women in the novel, there is no life in the Haveli. They are confined to it and can only dream of lives beyond it. As Geeta observes, the life has gone out of their lives that have passed trying to follow the dictates of tradition. Geeta tries to bring this life back, through her efforts at educating the women. The changes in the exterior of the Haveli also indicate the imperceptible changes inside it.

The Haveli thus forms an apt setting for the novel. Women are passive sufferers unable to remove the conventional, orthodox and traditional rules of the Haveli. Geeta has been differently brought up and has attended college, studied with boys and for such a girl, living in the confined atmosphere of a world of deep rooted customs is axiomatically unimaginable and difficult. Geeta has been advised by her mother to keep her head covered, respect her mother-in-law and never argue with her elders. Meenakshi Thapan opines that, “*Women who transgress their habitual, ‘assigned’ socio-physical spaces run the risk of being labeled as of ‘loose virtue; and are subjected to strong censure by older member’*” (Thapan 115).

Geeta has had no direct conversation with her husband’s grandfather and father due to the Purdah system portrayed in the novel. This practicing of keeping Purdah can be noticed in upper caste women rather than lower-caste. According to sociologists Indira Parikh and Pulin Garg as described in article Women’s space ‘Inside the Haveli’, Incarnation or Insurrection?, the article describes the traditional state of Purdah in India where upper class women live mostly indoors. The novella presents that even after years of Geeta’s coming into the family, her father-in-law and his father were strangers to her for she never had spoken a word to them.

Sudhir Kakar analyzes this situation and comments: *Communication with the older men is minimal (if it exists at all) since they . . . are traditionally expected to maintain a posture of formal restraint in the presence of the newcomer . . .* (Kakar 63). In her book entitled Colonialism/Postcolonialism, Ania Loomba describes the cruel behaviour of men at the time:

Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home. They seized upon the home and the woman assembles of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be Westernised but all was not lost if the domestic space retained its cultural purity (Loomba 141)

Gender bias is found throughout the novel, initially in the social structure, how the meaning of gender has been built and then reconstructed both biologically and ideologically. This discrimination exists between women and men virtually where every society is known to us founded on the existing assumptions of gender difference and policies of gender inequality. We have Sita and Savitri who are made outstanding as models which Mehta satirizes on the issue. Geeta tries to find her female identity in the very beginning course of her Journey but remains silent and passive. She hides her emotional feelings through her physical veiling. She finds that the other women of the Haveli also thrive on gossip and simultaneously understands that never expressed an opinion or revealed their true feelings.

When at nineteen Geeta had come as a bride at Jeewan Niwas (Haveli), she was lively and spontaneous. She had not been taught to stint in giving affection; nor was she taught to keep her feelings concealed. Her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind . . . In the haveli no one really expressed their feelings. They covered their emotions in an elaborate exchange of formal gestures and

words. Even her husband talked to his parents as if they were dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties. (32)

Veiling the face may be considered a symbol of masking inner emotion in the Haveli. Indian theory of Aesthetics compares this concealment to an externally imposed denial of Aesthetic emotion. Even after two years in the Haveli, Geeta feels nervous when relatives gathered as she was still not comfortable with the veil on her face.

“In the haveli men were regarded with awe as if they were Gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care.” (21) The women of haveli remark: “She will never adjust. She is not one of us” (29).

Her mother-in-law says that even an educated girl can be molded (30). Geeta never raised her voice but has been considerate and gentle. As Gayatri Spivak points out in her famous essay **Can the subaltern speak?** “The voice of subaltern woman remains silent and irreclaimable” (Spivak 35). Spivak regards the power of speech as synonymous with agency where as Jung suggests that “*Silence could be language through which women in this land realized themselves*” (20 Jung)

The main theme of the novel begins with Geeta’s alienation from the life of the Haveli leading to her acceptance of its traditions and contemporary rules gradually. She learns to respect them and takes pride in them. No longer could she see the confictions.

She came to love the veil that her face, this allowed her to think while the others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them. (23)

She raised her voice with the entire family turning against her. She has begun making great pleasure taking classes for women with simultaneous sewing classes for them. Here begins the heroine’s Journey from traditional world behind the veil into the modernity. The novel takes us into two different antithetical concepts of tradition and modernity and lands us into heterogeneous ideologies. One can visualize Geeta’s objective to be significant in rebuilding Indian society and family life.

The Haveli no longer stands for tradition, narrowness and servitude of women and shackles of free but finally emerges out as a representative of modernism, rationalism, new outlook and an emancipated woman. Though facing disorientation and criticism initially, Geeta succeeds in sending her servant’s daughter to school and educate her, the act which mellows the maids and the Haveli women later enlightening them. This act of Geeta symbolizes the modernism reflecting emancipation of women to educate themselves.

Geeta successfully begins a literacy campaign for the children of the servants and then for the other women. She is identified as a successful lady challenging the rotten rules of the Haveli. It was a serious offence then to violate the rule of women having education. Hindu families at the outset alleged women saying that a girl who is taught to read and write would soon after marriage become a widow.

Geeta is finally transformed as the mistress of the Haveli with the entrusted duties of continuing the existing traditions. At the time of writing this book, Rama Mehta finds that the society itself was passing through the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. The novel shows neither victory nor defeat but harmony and understanding paradoxical ideas. One can also visualize the aristocratic feudal system of Rajasthan. The focus of the novel is on the superstitious world inside the Haveli and the stereotypical ideology of the women of the Haveli. A widow’s presence on religious occasions is considered inauspicious.

Geeta’s efforts have shown colours of a new beginning victory and fulfillment for her liberation from conventional life towards emancipation in spite of being caged in the Haveli. For thousands of women caught in the complexity of dilemma of traditions and modernity, Geeta is definitely a role model. It is to be accepted

universally that though women have been mentally and physically equipped to perform at par with men, they have been denied existence as complete human beings.

Conclusion:

Inside the Haveli stands for portrayal of realistic and naturalness and poise that are disarming and effective at once. The reader finds it uncanny with the evocation of scene, character and atmosphere. There is romance but no cheap sex. We can see tension but no violence and find a respect for values and traditions simultaneously. The scene on the global world is much changed now and women are now being allowed to have academic education. A reader has to understand here that Geeta's aim has been to enable the women of Haveli to fulfill their traditional roles better but not to change those roles. Boehmer claims that :

Colonized women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste (Boehmer 224)

Geeta's Journey is from Unorthodox culture of her Parents to the Contemporary and Conservative culture of the Haveli. She could quench her thirst for her identity curbed with Purdah which she has had been able to get it only in the last. She travelled from dissatisfaction to acceptance and from tolerance to generosity and finally to munificence and bountifulness. She has left no ambiguity but choice of quick understanding and comprehensibility to the readers.

Z.N.Patil rightly puts it,

"We find Geeta passing from out of the constricted, suffocating atmosphere of the haveli to some breezes of freedom. But Mehta's attitude towards this conflict between tradition and modernity is ambiguous. Nowhere do we hear the author talking either explicitly or implicitly against the traditional, auto telic world of the haveli. Neither does she explicitly talk in favor of the little freedom Geeta gets at the end of the novel. Hence it appears that Geeta is now shown as the preserver of traditions of haveli. (Patil 32)

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