

Tradition versus Modernity: A Study of Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli

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Abstract:

In feminist movement the women writers like Rama Mehta, Kamla Markandaya, Shobha De, Venu Chitale, Comelia Sorabji, Shashi Deshpande, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Arundhati Roy have contributed a lot in India. In their works, they discuss about belief system, traditions, rituals and customs. All women, be it a simple rural woman, educated urban middle class woman or educated socialite women with urban base have to suffer in the male dominated society and face discrimination. All these modern writers have touched the female aspects like social, political and cultural concern, search for self-identity or deeper and complex inter personal relations of a woman. They have given a better elaboration of the agonized female psyche, her difficulties, her suffering and then finally her liberation. They portray real position of a suffering woman in a man's world and to some extent these writers become successful in transforming the Indian male's psyche, thus reflecting a shift in the sensibility of both writer and the reader.

Keywords: Tradition, modernity, purdah, education, patriarchal society.

Introduction:

Mehta's social work helped her to know about the trials and tribulations of women in male dominated society. Rama Mehta was a sociologist by profession as well as a literary artist, who had done research on topics like educated Hindu women and the Hindu divorced women in her sociological study. In the *Western Educated Hindu Woman*, she mentions that educated women will challenge the harmony of family life if they develop personal ambitions, therefore practice such as early marriage, dowry, purdah and joint family were instrumental in keeping women from going to schools and colleges

The novel *Inside the Haveli* was published in 1977 and won The Sahitya Akademi award. The novel describes the family setup of a Rajput family in Rajasthan. It highlights the woman's life in great havelis of Rajasthan. The main character, Geeta is modern and educated

young woman. She is feels trapped under the weight of patriarchal and traditional society. Rama Mehata believes that man compels woman to think the status of the “other”.

Women of haveli, they find themselves helpless to break the taboos and conventional rules of the haveli and become passive sufferer. Rama Mehta wants to bring a change by finding a proper space for the female in the society and challenging the age-old traditions and bondages imposed by a male dominated society. So, the novel is a study of the journey of main protagonist Geeta who faces challenges to find her own identity at the mental, social and physical level.

The word 'haveli' originated from Persian language and it means 'a surrounded or enclosed place'. The basic structure of Havelis has residential rooms around an open courtyard and can be extended as per the requirement of growing family. Further, there is provision of separate courtyards for men, women and servants in typical Rajasthan havelis. Geeta, the protagonist got her education from coeducational college of Bombay and lived in cultural environment of metropolitan. She is nineteen years old when she comes to Udaipur as bride of Ajay Singh, a professor of science. Jeevan Niwas, Ajay's haveli is one of the most prominent havelis of Udaipur. Rigid and traditional ways of the haveli, like purdah is big cultural shock to Geeta.

Geeta feels trapped in a big haveli where all the time she is surrounded by women. She had a nuclear family in Bombay and haveli hasan army of maids, their children and women from other havelis in addition to her mother- in -law and grandmother- in -law. She finds it difficult to make a balance between use of her education and knowledge obligations of married life in a rigid and traditional big family. It is a big challenge for Geeta to make an adjustment among the role of a wife, daughter-in-law and mother.

In Udaipur she often misses her metropolitan way of life in Bombay. In haveli, she always considers herself as an outsider and is not able to make an adjustment according to the customs and norms of the conventional family around her. It is a depiction of life behind purdah in most orthodox family of Udaipur and her adaptation in this life. It is the study of changes brought by her in the haveli. Geeta works to be an ideal daughter, but her modern views have conflict with traditional norms in haveli.

The moment she lands on the platform, she finds herself surrounded by women who have covered their faces and are singing. One of them comes forward and covers her face with her sari and asks her not to show her face. Bewildered and frightened Geeta manages to get in to the car without talking to these women. These women keep singing loud and follow her. When Geeta uncovers her face, Pari pulsl back the sari over her face and tells her that in Udaipur they keep purdah.

The above incident highlights the menace of Purdah system. Both Hindu and Muslim society follow Purdah. The Purdah was brought to India by Muslims which segregated women from men. Over a period of time, this custom was adopted by many of the Hindu families and spread gradually all over India. For all that Geeta, had no face-to-face conversation with her husband's father and grandfather. She never had a word with them and even after two years, they were strangers to her. The haveli had various self-contained sections

for women as they kept *Pardaha*. Entry of men in these sections was prohibited, only close male relatives were allowed, and their entry had to be pronounced before.

All the activities of *haveli* revolve around patriarch of the house and women, maids and servants work to keep the males satisfied. Men enjoy the status of God and women serve them without any question in *haveli*. Geeta tried to change the status quo and started teachings the children of the servants and maids in the *haveli*. However, Kanwarnisa, her mother—in-law did not like this. She ridiculed her and thought that she would give up shortly. For her endeavour to bring change in *haveli*, she had to face many challenges.

As Geeta has started to impart education to the children of servants, so she also brings signs of changing in the *haveli* through her activities. Her mother-in-law is not approved of her idea and she remarks that let her fulfil her wish, it will not continue longer. Now Geeta has got the adaptability and is comfortable with the surrounding. She gives more values to the familial ties and wants to keep the ancestral dignity of the *haveli*. But she is not able to mix up with the women of the *haveli*. She enjoys teaching and appoints a lady to take sewing classes to teach the students to cut an embroidery.

Geeta outbursts that Vijay cannot be got engaged at this age. This is the first time; she talks to her mother-in-law in a raised voice. She is repentant why she stays in Udaipur so long she could easily persuade Ajay to leave the city, she feels trapped here and she remarks that if my life is ruined here, I will not allow anyone to ruin the life of my children. Geeta disagrees with Vijay's marriage as she has not attained marriageable age yet.

Bhagwat Singh ji assures Geeta that he has made it clear to Daulat Singh ji that under no circumstances Vijay would be taken out of school. Geeta convinces herself that this is the right decision. Despite the criticism and disapproval, Geeta successfully arranges for Sita, the maid servant's daughter, to attend school, and the attitude of the maids and *haveli* women soften. Ajay and her father-in-law appreciate her efforts. Ajay Singh expresses his conviction and says that she has done the right thing and he is proud of her, and it is time for new ideas to enter the *haveli*.

The novel depicts the journey of an educated woman as she moves from modernity back into the traditional world, where strict rules of etiquette and subservience prevail. Geeta is transformed into the mistress of the *haveli* and entrusted with the responsibility of upholding its traditions. At the time Rama Mehta wrote this book, society itself was undergoing a transition from tradition to modernity. The essence of the novel lies in the harmony and understanding between these two opposing ideas.

Geeta is an independent woman who, via her inner strength, determination, education and calibre finds her voice and establishes her identity in the fight for education. Even the women who once criticized and ridiculed her are now compelled to acknowledge that she has brought the gift of learning to the poor. Geeta is proudly hailed as greatest asset of *haveli*. Geeta is undoubtedly a progressive woman with her own vision. In her quest for liberation, Geeta gradually moves from a subordinate position to empowerment, from silence to speech. This strategic approach was a deliberate choice by Geeta herself, who, through self-examination and introspection, concluded that she could never fully break free from the

unyielding bonds of the haveli and the Purdah. She understood that her actions had to originate from within haveli and the Purdah, and that she had limited resources to forge her own path. She also realized that remaining silent and wasting her education is not the solution. So, she worked diligently to transform her state of despair into hope. Rama Mehta demonstrates great sensitivity and awareness in giving meaning to her fictional character Geeta, effectively portraying the intricate relationship between women, tradition, and modernity through Geeta's pursuit of emancipation. Rama Mehta conveys her progressive views on women, and Geeta's victory.

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