

Locating Women in *Inside the Haveli* by Rama Mehta

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Abstract

Inside the Haveli, the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award winner English novel written by Rama Mehta, a notable novelist of India of the 20th century, presents the tale of an urban young woman, Geeta, and her struggle to preserve her identity and individuality in the traditional surroundings of the *haveli* of the *Rajputs*, a martial race of India. It gives to the reader a lot to contemplate about the lives of the women of the *haveli*, their customs and rituals, their rigidity to adapt modern ways and culture, their ignorance towards female education and their willing discrimination towards themselves and other women of the society and household. Through this novel, Rama Mehta tries to convey that every woman

is blessed with an inner strength and it is not necessary to rebel to preserve one's identity. Geeta does not rebel against adverse circumstances and does not insult any relationship, but on the other hand, in a very dignified way, maintaining her individuality, discovers the path of her emancipation.

Keywords: Astoundingly Entangled, Orthodox, Paradoxical, Emancipation, *Haveli*, *Rajputs*, Identity, Customs, Rituals, *Purdah*, Superstitious.

An Indian writer writing in English, Rama Mehta (1923-1978) was a notable novelist and essayist whose writings are suggestive of women independence and social reforms. She was posthumously awarded the *Sahitya* Academy Award for her distinguished novel, *Inside the Haveli* published in 1977.

Inside the Haveli, presents the tale of an urban young woman, Geeta, and her struggle to preserve her identity and individuality in the traditional surroundings. It gives to the reader a lot to contemplate about the lives of the traditional women of the *haveli*, their customs and rituals, their rigidity to adapt the modern ways and culture, their ignorance towards female education and their willing discrimination towards themselves and the other women of the society and household.

The novel is an astounding read for modern women of today who are not accustomed to the rigid traditional practices of the Indian women. The subtle approach of Rama Mehta on the issue of tradition verses modernism inspired us to write a research paper on this novel. The author saves the novel from being didactic and adopts a reflective approach which does not conclude on the topic but reflects and leaves the reader to contemplate on what is right and what is wrong.

In this novel, Rama Mehta vividly describes the complexity of the dilemma in the mind and heart of an urban and educated woman, who, by virtue of her marriage is brought face to face with the customs and traditions of the conservative household of her

husband. Meera Ramnavmiwale, in an article, “Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli: A Feminist Perspective*,” describing the state of Geeta opines: “The novel explores the inner self of Geeta who symbolizes the ‘New Woman.’ She is educated and lives in close association with society brushing aside all narrow social conventions” (33-40).

The novel presents the struggle of the protagonist, Geeta, a well read and bread girl of Bombay, who gets married to a science Professor of Udaipur who hails from a family with a traditional background. She has to strive against the rigidity of her husband’s family traditions in order to preserve her identity. Rama Mehta very sensitively evolves the persona of Geeta. The book explicitly portrays the clash between the traditional and modern where in the *haveli* with its people, customs and culture stands for traditional and Geeta has been symbolized as a modern woman trapped in traditional binds. An educated girl, Geeta, who has been raised in an open society of Bombay, finds difficult to adjust to the new surroundings of her husband’s family. The *haveli* of the *Ranas* of Rajasthan were determined by the *purdah* system for women. The women of these traditional families lose all their individuality and identity.

The very moment she steps in Udaipur, she gets criticized for not covering her face. Even the maids of the *haveli* who had come to the railway station to welcome her with their songs, make her feel alien. “One of them came forward, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, where do you come from that you show your face to the world?” (17). The statement of one of the maids here exemplifies the evil associated with the *purdah* system. Jung regards veil and *purdah* as features of “psychic empowerment” (19). Commenting upon the *purdah* system in her article, “Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah,” Jasbir Jain states:

The practice of *purdah* in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. *Purdah* reinforces the idea of

female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology. (243)

Geeta finds herself astoundingly entangled in the customs of the orthodox and gigantic *haveli*. Born and brought up in a liberal and nuclear educated family, Geeta is encaged within a bunch of uneducated ignorant women who are slaves to customs and willingly ignorant towards their emancipation. She finds herself surrounded by hoards of maids, women and children and has no privacy even to talk to her own husband till the night falls. It is a cultural shock faced by Geeta and her new woman persona clashes with the orthodox traditions of the *haveli* due to which she becomes gloomy and greatly perplexed as to what kind of behaviour is expected out of her. "Marriage brought Geeta from the outer world of modernity to the enclosures of the threshold" (88).

Two years of her marriage have passed but Geeta could not see or meet her grandfather-in-law or her father-in-law despite the fact that the *haveli* resonates in their wants and importunities and their presence in the *haveli* is felt perpetually. This is completely paradoxical to her own house where men and women are treated as two sides of a coin and the advice of her mother is as worthy as that of her father. Geeta's modern attitude towards life goes for a toss and she is cuffed in the agony of her soul. Her mind is in constant conflict with the ignorance of women around her who also expected her to behave similarly in the tradition bound fenced environment. The *haveli* regarded men "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).

Geeta gets repressed as her upbringing was absolutely modern and here the atmosphere was absolutely conservative. Her mind revolts and her heart aches. She becomes listless and silent and finds a refuge in her room which takes her away from the orthodoxy all around. It was not possible for her to accept the Hippocratic and orthodox

atmosphere of the *haveli* life. An educated person, as she was, she was tolerating the demands made upon her, though not willingly. As a result, her confidence gets shattered. She becomes quite and meek. In her quietude she gets reminded of her mother's admonition, "Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much" (16). This brings her some consolation.

Geeta finds her persona torn and tangled between the modern values given to her by her mother and the customary expectations of her mother-in-law. Even after trying to the maximum she is unable to adjust herself with the traditions of the *haveli*. She discusses this issue with her husband and asks him to shift elsewhere which he is unable to do. Geeta is left with no choice except to accept the trauma silently. She tries to educate the maids of the household to keep busy and do something creative except gossiping and visiting other women from other *havelis* which has been a general routine of the women in the *havelis*. Yet, she does not feel comfortable even after seven years and one daughter. "Even after seven years I am a stranger to those who are mine and I will always remain a stranger" (103).

The classes for maids become a source of reconciliation for Geeta's wounded soul. She starts liking the big rooms of the *haveli* and feels rejuvenated and confident again. She is still behind the veil but the tears have given way to smile and with her new found confidence the conflict disappears and she discovers her feminine self. Geeta confounding to the traditions is now able to abide by her modern values also. It was "not just that the classes filled the empty hours but they also offered challenge" (161).

All *haveli* women were handled like dolls. "Women behind thick walls had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed – up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show. Women of the upper classes did not talk in the streets" (110). But

Geeta's feeling of merely being a doll in the *haveli* is vented out but her efforts to retain the traditions and synthesizing them with the halo of new modern ways of emancipation and progression.

Without realizing the indebted meaning related to the term "Identity," the term has become a cliché being used by scholars of English literature and English literary criticism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find "the woman's quest for self-definition the underlying plot of nineteenth century writing by women" (76), while Elaine Showalter finds 'self-discovery' "a search for identity" (13), as the primary theme of feminine literature which has come to surface after say 1920. *Inside the Haveli* presents a suitable example of Geeta's search for identity in an opposite cultural background and atmosphere. R.K. Asthana offers another view of the novel: "*Inside the Haveli* is a novel that sets up a face-off between tradition and modernity and it is seen as offering the best of both the worlds"(193).

Viney Kirpal, in his article, "*How Traditional can a Modern Indian be: Analysis of Inside the Haveli*" has presented a different viewpoint:

Rama Mehta's intentions in writing this novel are to help the western educated Indian reader regain his belief in his own traditions. . . . The resolution of the novel is that Geeta gradually grows away from the westernised perception acquired from her education and learns to appreciate the dignity, solemnity, meaning and worth of *Indigenous Traditions*. (176)

A recipient of Sahitya Academy Award (1979), *Inside the Haveli* beautifully draws the picture of the culture and traditions of the feudal in ancient and medieval India and how the women of the feudal structure were subjugated by the male chauvinistic society and lived a subjugated life. Orthodoxy and a blind adherence to superstitious beliefs and practices were a common practice in the *havelis* of the times. The evil system of *purdah* had to be necessarily practised. The women of the *havelis* had no other option but to compromise with

their career and life and to adapt themselves to the environment the system proposed. Geeta, an educated and a very sensitive woman from the city of Bombay, gradually compromises with the changed environment of the *haveli* but determined, introduces inevitable changes suitable to the changed modern times.

Being a sociologist, Rama Mehta has taken a sociological approach, “the approach which starts with conviction that the relation of literature to society is vitally important” (Scott 125).

In my perspective, Rama Mehta through the protagonist, Geeta, besides presenting the conflict between tradition and modernity also presents the psychological experiences a woman had to undergo in an alien environment after her marriage. How a woman had to adapt herself to the changed circumstances, and if she has the will and determination, than how she can act as a spark to ignite necessary and desirable changes. Mehta’s concern, through Geeta, is not to let down anyone or not to accomplish the victory of Geeta over her in laws, but to show the light of success, progress and development to the coming generation of women. Mehta tries to convey that every woman is blessed with an inner strength and it is not necessary to rebel to preserve one’s identity. Geeta does not rebel against adverse circumstances and does not insult any relationship, but on the other hand, in a very dignified way, maintaining her individuality, she discovers the path of her emancipation.

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