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MODERN WOMAN AND IDENTITY IN RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI*

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper explores the two important themes of modern woman and gender identity in Rama Mehta's award winning novel *Inside the Haveli*. Generally the image of the new women and struggle for identity of own is popular theme in the Indian English Novel. Rama Mehta hails from a modern urban breed; she has her own particular unique feeling of Indian acclimation to the convention. She assumes the part of an impetus shedding new hues to convention and modernity. Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* is a trademark book of the colloquialism that writing is a reflection of the literature and that the artists are the molding spirits of the same. The novel produces not just a pen image of the Haveli in Rajasthan yet in addition fills in as an original confirmation for the way of life of the womenfolk. *Inside the Haveli* investigates a voyage the hero experiences to beat her look for character at the psychological, social and physical level. Geeta plays the role of an ideal house - wife and an ideal daughter-in-law. The novel gains its feminist stance from Geeta's persistent exploration of herself as an individual. Here, Geeta achieves security through reconciliation. She fights to maintain the modern values that she has always lived by. The ethos of the novel is neither the victory nor the defeat but of harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas of modernity and tradition. This research work It is suggested that a modern educated woman like Geeta should pursue some meaningful activity within the precincts of her household in order to find happiness and contentment as well as her rights, desires, struggles and victories all together. It is Geeta's voice about her thoughts and feelings that we near in "India the Haveli".

Key Words: *Inside The Haveli*, Modernity, Feminism, Identity

Introduction

Indian English post-colonial women writers Rama Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair and the voices of Indian diaspora Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee have managed to carve out their spaces next to the prominent male writers of the contemporary post-colonial Indian English literary canon, including Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Amit Chaudhuri, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Chandra, and others. They questioned the existing social norms and they pushed back the boundaries of the traditional role of women by giving their protagonists a sense of personal identity and a voice of their own. Rama Mehta's writing is concerned with the inner world of a modern educated, young

woman who is successful in establishing her own identity in a male – dominated and tradition bound society. She attempts to give an honest portrayal of the suffering, disappointments and frustrations of her protagonist 'Geeta'. Rama Mehta and Geeta the protagonist of the novel, have a great deal in common. The protagonist like the novelist has been a lively, open-minded, western educated girl. After her education at Nainital and St Stephen's College, Delhi she has been selected to the Indian Foreign Service. She sacrifices her prestigious career, when she marries to Shree Jagat Mehta, a fellow IFS officer. She lives at her husband's native place, Udaipur. Their house which is in-fact a mansion is known by the name "Jeevan Nivas", where she has been looked after by two maids Pari and Duppa. Mehta has given birth to a daughter and the child has been named Vijay. All the above is reflected in the story of Geeta, who is educated and full of life. She is married to a conservative and traditional family of Udaipur.

The central element of defining the women's role was skilfully interwoven with other relevant themes of the Indian reality, such as family relations, religious tensions, history, culture, politics and social discrimination, which gave credibility to women's writing and created literary space for women's voices. The writers empowered women, granted them identity, mobility and the freedom of expression which they had been denied before. For this reason, the late twentieth century women's literature made a significant contribution to the change of attitudes towards the position of women in the Indian society and literature, and as such it holds an important place in the development of women's writing. The impact of national movements and the extent of modern education is so enormous that the image of woman in the Indian novels shows a palpable shift towards a feminist undercurrent with a woman protagonist who defies the prevalent social setup.

Rama Mehta born in Nainital in 1923 was a well-known sociologist. She made several studies of educated Indian women who are caught between tradition and modernity. She also worked as a lecturer and plunged into writing with her novel "Inside the Haveli". She also wrote non-fiction research works such as divorced woman and from purdah to modernity. Her other two novels are *Ramu: A story of India* (1966) and *the life of Keshav: A Family story from India* (1969). Rama Mehta occupies a noteworthy place among the contemporary women novelists. The problems of women and their quest for identity are the main concerns of her novels.

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977) presents the story of the protagonist Geeta's identity-crisis in the cross-cultural content. Brought up in Bombay, Geeta the independent young woman struggles to maintain her modern identity in a traditional world of the haveli of Udaipur, where she is married. Therefore, the novel projects a journey to find woman space in the society and to search one's own authentic identity. The novel presents mind-boggling variety of theme as well as style. Geeta displays a disgruntled self which is at war with the patriarchal and conventional society. Geeta tried to speak in a distinctively personal voice, among the collective voice, asserting the autonomy of women.

The novelist focuses on the conflict and consciousness of women in Post-independent India. Like the protagonist of the novel, a number of young educated modern women after their marriage are shuffled into an entirely different and contrary atmosphere. They are isolated from their family members. They are confused amidst pressures, demands and expectations of their new roles and their in-laws. In spite of all this, many women succeed in retaining their self-respect and possess their own space through efforts and consultation. Geeta is one of them because she too succeeds in her negotiation in her in-laws' house. Her attitude and her decisions in her marital home provide a suitable alternative for women's education which ultimately proves that even a single woman if educated and coherent, can become the cause of a social change.

The novel's latter half shows Geeta's search for an independent identity which is seen by her 'moving' within her traditionally specified confines. The author then talks about transgressing boundaries and spaces by bringing in the sub-plot of the novel through the character of Lakshmi. It clearly discusses the male and female spaces in the novel and the stark difference between the two spaces. It talks about how still women are stable and wandering women like Lakshmi are evil- a typical notion of patriarchal society. Despite the alienation faced by Geeta in the prevailing culture she still is a participant in the culture. As the novel progresses she is seen to find a space within the limits of that culture. Her ambiguous nature can thus be seen as an amalgamation of both tradition and culture.

Rama Mehta's writing is seen as an 'othering' of females which not only subordinates their position in the society but also silences their voices in a family. They are expected to maintain the household and take care of the children as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law or mother-in-law. Even in the 21st century, when in India girls have repeatedly proved themselves competent for every profession, the deep rooted gender discrimination continues among even the affluent and educated people living a so called modern life in the metro cities.

The article discusses in the light of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* the issues of female rebellion and retreat of women in the haveli. It brings out the patriarchal mentalities of the society during a particular period. The article also deals with the issues on how "voicing of protests, alienates her from the prevailing culture on one hand and on the other makes her a participant in the traditional hegemonic practices which oppress her."

Thematic study

Mehta's novel is written in fluent English, but it is also clearly the work of an author fluent in at least one other language judging from the sentence structures and manners of expression, which are far from being those of conventional standard English. Published in London, this novel describes a lifestyle which would be totally alien and unknown to the average Briton. Mehta attempts to convey to her readers the internal workings of a "haveli" in Rajasthan, a social set-up which is feudal in structure. To this end, Mehta retains rather than translate many terms, such as terms of kinship and address for example, "Bai Sa, Bua Sa, Kaki Sa, Mami Sa", the honorific "ji" attached to names, and also names of foods such as "roti" and "laddoo". Mehta does translate some phrases which she judges would be incomprehensible to her English speaking readers, phrases which also convey the flavour of the place and period, such as the traditional blessing of "May you have eight sons", or "May the haveli flourish forever". The narrative itself contains much explanation, ostentatiously for the benefit of Geeta, the haveli's newest arrival, but also for the benefit of the reader uninitiated in knowledge of Rajasthani and haveli customs.

The novel is divided into three sections. While the first two sections have nine chapters each, the third section is spread over to eleven chapters. Right at the beginning we have a vivid description of Udaipur, its topography, surroundings, down-town lanes, palaces and havelis. (p. 1 - 4) Further, in the next chapters, we are introduced to the three ladies, Bhabha Sa, Kunwaraniji and Geeta, and we as well get to know how one generation passes on the mantle of the haveli's tradition to the next one. Together with it, the novel also gives position, loyalty and orthodox feelings of the haveli maids. Thus, we notice how Pariji, Ganga, Dhapu and other maids are proud of the honour and legacy of the havelis. This is what Rama Mehta says about Pariji: Pari was only a maid servant in the haveli like the other eight, but with her tact, hard work and devoted service for forty-five years, she had established a special place for herself in the family. (p. 6) As a matter of fact, the haveli stands as a shelter home for the destitute poor folk. Pari was her father's favourite child. He did not want to see her suffer from hunger and then slowly wither away like the other three. So he decided to give her away. In this he was following a common practice of feudal Rajasthan where villagers in desperate circumstances gave their sons and daughters to the care of aristocratic families. (p.6) Chapter IV of the first section recapitulates Geeta's memories of her marriage with Ajay, the only son of Bhagwat Singhji and the heir of Jeevan Niwas. Ajay was a science professor. It was presumed that he would soon shift to Delhi University. So, Geeta the Bombay girl of modern education and culture had hoped that their sojourn at Udaipur would be short. But as soon as she reaches Udaipur, Pari, the chief maid of the haveli tells her In Udaipur, we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face. (p. 10) She also comes to know that she is not to step out the bounds of the Zenana section of the haveli. Once she happens to stroll into the audience hall. She looks with awe at all the gilt-framed portraits of her husband's forefathers: Looking at the strong determined faces, Geeta had thought with pride these must have been the kind of men who had fought and won battles against the Moghuls. Just as she took a step backward to get a better view of the handsome faces, a cold hand touched her shoulder. (p. 17)

Inside the Haveli (1977) is Rama Mehta's only novel for adult readers. The novel won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1979 and was appreciated by established critics such as Srinivasa Iyengar:

Inside the Haveli is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction, even an authentic sociological study, and it is written with a naturalness and poise that are disarming and effective at once. The evocation of scene, character and especially of atmosphere is almost uncanny.... The balance between repose and movement is well sustained, there is tension but no cheap sex, there is tension but no violence, and there is a feeling for the values and varieties. (Iyengar 753)

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* is actually a fictionalized version of her academic research book *The Western Educated Indian Woman*. Indeed, the novel and the non-fictional book contain common views regarding the issues of Indian women's relation to tradition and modernity. Z N Patil examined the whole work as a sociological case study by presenting a number of taboos that governed the haveli.

In the novel the figure of the veiled women is indicative of a high class family. The women are not allowed to go to that part of the haveli which is reserved for men. Just after marriage when Geeta, "leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women"(15) comes to her husband's house, she is instructed to adopt the mores and codes of the haveli and to keep her face always covered. She is forced to live by its rigidly enforced codes of behaviour which center on the ritual avoidance of both men and older women through veiling. This is somewhat a new and irritating code of conduct at least for Geeta who hails from an advanced society where such things are beyond imagination. That is why the women of haveli believe, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us."(29) But as we find a harmonious blending of tradition and modernity in Geeta, she, soon, discovers positive aspects of veiling because "this allows her to think while 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) "There was something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time."(31)

But gradually the life in the haveli begins to have its play on Geeta. She begins to adjust herself to the new circumstances and begins to accept the codes of the haveli. "Looking at the men below she forgot her daily irritations; she felt proud to be the young mistress of the haveli. How could she allow little discomforts to blind her to the great traditions of the family?"(40)

The novel portrays the educated heroine's journey from modernity back into the traditional world behind the veil, where the severe restrictions of etiquette and subservience dominate life. Geeta a protagonist is transformed into the mistress of the haveli and is entrusted with the duty of continuance of its traditions. When Rama Mehta wrote this book, the society itself was passing through the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. The ethos of the novel is neither the victory nor the defeat but of harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas of modernity and tradition. The novel also brings attention to the aristocratic feudal system of Rajasthan. The following statement points:

She (Pari) had come to the haveli as a child of eight. The year her father brought her to the mansion there was a terrible famine in Rajasthan . . . He did not want to see her suffer from hunger and then slowly wither away like the other three. So he decided to give her away. In this he was following a common practice of feudal Rajasthan where villagers in desperate circumstances gave their sons and daughters to the care of aristocratic families. (9)

Geeta's modern thoughts and progressive views, for which she has struggled earlier, are still there. It is through this struggle Geeta has obtained the two important approvals from the conservative family of her husband. Those approvals are – right of the girl for education irrespective of her class distinction and right of the mother to have a decision in the marriage of her daughter, especially to prevent a child marriage which has a high approval of tradition. But these victories never prompt her to underestimate the traditions of the haveli or the conservative people. Instead Geeta's adaptability, compromise and forbearance help to resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity. The concern and care of her husband and his relatives also help her to acquire this amalgamation. With this adaptability and compromise, Geeta appreciates the life in the haveli, adjusts herself and become, finally, its mistress.

After the death of Bhagwat Singhji, his son, Ajay becomes he master of the haveli and Geeta, the new mistress. The novel ends here with a promise that the new mistress will bring out a harmony between tradition and modernity. She will preserve the good traditional concepts and accept modern values when it is

necessary. (Rama Mehta's narration and Geeta's search for identity in the conservative haveli thus concludes with this positive and hopeful idea though the death of Bhagwat Singhji and the widows attire of his wife draw sympathy and produce tears even in the eyes of the readers who are actually involved in the journey of Geeta through inside the haveli.)

Identity is a central concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which, along with its even vaguer terminological twin the 'self' has become a cliché without becoming clear. 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), as the main theme of women's literature since 1920's. *Inside the Haveli* explores a journey the protagonist undergoes to overcome her search for identity at the mental, social and physical level. Her journey starts in Physical manner when she moves to Udaipur by train after getting married to Ajay, an educated science Professor having aristocratic norms. There is also a movement from present to past and past to present which occurs in the mind of Geeta. She often feels nostalgic about her past, as being modern, she feels herself an outsider, unable to adjust herself in accordance with the taboos and norms of conventionally webbed society around her. 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). A Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), *Inside the Haveli* presents an intimate picture of a system which existed since feudal times and is a revelation of attitudes towards women and their status in a certain section of Indian society. It is a presentation of life behind purdah in Udaipur and focuses on how Geeta arranges to be fitted in the most orthodox family of Udaipur and in the haveli as well as it is the study of metamorphosis brought to the haveli by her advent.

Apart from the protagonist's adaptability, search for identity and silent transformation the novel *Inside the Haveli* also brings out certain carefully illustrated themes and views. Rama Mehta's treatment of the plot at the same time becomes literal, sociological and metaphorical. If we make a journey through Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* we will come across several interesting facts and approaches that are thought-provoking. The sociologist-cum-novelist, Rama Mehta, not merely presented the details of a traditional haveli where Geeta's small adventures would unfold. *Inside the Haveli* also provides different interesting accounts regarding the gender, class and tradition prevalent in the haveli.

The patriarchal and traditional restrictions are portrayed through the view point of women. But the interesting fact is that these restrictions which prevent the women from carving out an identity for themselves and to live independently, are accepted by the same women as their destiny. The gender problems are presented in the novel with care and accuracy. Child marriage, treatment of female child as a burden, purdah system, ill treatment of widow – almost all of the patriarchal notions and restrictions are present in between the gold and glitter of the haveli. Geeta, the educated, progressive minded daughter-in-law could bring out some kind of awakening to the women's world, especially to her immediate surroundings. The undercurrent of feminine and feminist sensibilities can also be viewed throughout the novel. More or less most of the aspects regarding the life and problems of women have been given thorough study in *Inside the Haveli*.

Inside the Haveli also deals with this inside/outside dyad as the women of haveli. They are passive sufferers; unable to remove the conventional, orthodox and traditional rules and taboos of the haveli. However, Geeta has been differently brought up. She has gone to college and studied with boys. How would such a girl learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of deep-rooted customs? Before getting married, Geeta is given an advice by her mother: "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) Meenakshi Thapan is of the view 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". Geeta tries to be an ideal daughter but her modern views come into clash when she first lands to Udaipur:

The minute she had put her foot on the platform she was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. 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?' Geeta, bewildered, frightened managed to get in to the car without talking to the women who followed her, singing as loud as they could. . . [When] Geeta had lifted her face and pulled the sari back to see. 'No, no, you cannot do that,' Pari had snapped, pulling back the sari over her face. 'In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.'(17)

The above statement indicates the menace of Purdah system. For all that Geeta, has had no direct conversation with her husband's grandfather and father, and has lived isolated from the men. Even after two years her father-in-law and his father were strangers to her. She had never spoken a word to them. Sudhir Kakar analyzing this situation 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. . . (63). Bhagwant Singh ji, her father-in-law inquires about Geeta's health via maid-servants: 'How is Binniji,' he asked Pari (83).

The moment she lands in Udaipur, she is chastised for being bare faced and made to realize that she is an outsider even by the maids of the haveli who had come singing to the railway station to receive the new bride:

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?' (P.17)

Geeta finds herself suddenly enclosed and encaged in a huge haveli where she is all the time surrounded by women. From a nuclear and educated family she has come to find a horde of maids, their children and women from other havelis who keep visiting one another on the slightest pretext in addition to her mother- in -law and grandmother- in -law. Malashri Lal opines:

(M)arriage brought Geeta from the outer world of modernity to the enclosures of the threshold. (88)

It unfolds the classical clash between tradition and modernity. The two cities Udaipur and Bombay in *Inside the Haveli* stand for tradition and modernity respectively. The geographical description reveals the traditions and modernity as old and new city metaphorically: "The wall still divides Udaipur into two halves. The new township is beyond the old well and the city within it" (3). Geeta also brought winds of change in the haveli when she started teachings the children of the servants and maids. But Kanwarni sa, her mother-in-law was not happy with her this activity. She remarks: "Let Binni ji amuse herself. Her enthusiasm won't last long; she will soon get tired of the women. Then let see what she starts next" (161). During this Journey to bring modernity in the haveli, she has to face many comments against her. As she had developed an admiration for haveli, she is filled with outrage when she heard critical words about haveli and against her mother-in-law:

The desire to change the life in the haveli seemed to have subsided in her. Instead she said to herself: 'How dare anyone say a word against the haveli, these classes are not worth continuing. I will stop the girls from coming.' There was a new fervor in her, which she had not experienced before . . . There was none of the desperation of being enclosed within windowless walls that she wanted to shatter. 'I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds. Where else in the world would I get this kind of love and concern?' (170)

The novel ends abruptly revealing tradition gets the upper hand on the modernity. It is a blend of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity and above all revolt if the occasion demands and compromises for peaceful life. Though, the report given by Shikha Trivedy testifies to the fact that "even today people victimize their children in order to uphold their family honor and social customs.

A.G. Khan also believes that the protagonist values modernity without offending tradition: "In the process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any she induces her mother-inlaw with a feeling of warmth towards modernity" (44). Mehta has shown gradual development in Geeta. In section one of the novel her movements are awkward and clumsy. She is frightened and fascinated by the life of the haveli at the same time. Though she feels suffocated yet she dares not have a whiff of fresh air. She gains some confidence by the time the narrative reaches section II, yet her fascination and her fear of the haveli life turns into resentment and a subtle streak of hatred is also visible in her remarks. Section III, she is confident, and becomes assertive, serene yet a subtle rebel whose existence is reckoned with by the haveli people. Finally she emerges as the new lady of the haveli. Though the novel here ends abruptly, yet there is a promise

of a future mistress who would look towards the brighter and progressive side of life and would try to maintain a balance between the centuries old haveli traditions and the demands of modern life

Conclusion

Rama Mehta has skillfully dealt with culture in the novel *The Protagonist*. Geeta did not feel anything wrong in the social custom. The ethos of the novel is harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas of modernity and culture. The novel also gives message to the youth what we should retain of the past and what we should adopt from the present situation. If we are properly educated, culture and traditions does not come in the way of our personal freedom and individuality.

In Geeta, Rama Mehta has not presented a fictitious character. Rather she is the representative of millions of educated Indian women who like Geeta know the importance of family institution but at the same time they are also aware of their own rights and self-respect. She (educated Indian woman) does not fall a victim to the ages old traditions and customs of the society. She has started realizing her caliber, personality, power and desire to be treated equally with her masculine counterpart but at the same time she is not prepared to break the family. Therefore, if necessary, she is prepared to oppose but mostly in a tempered manner.

Finally she emerges as the new lady of the haveli. Though the novel here ends abruptly, yet there is a promise of a future mistress who would look towards the brighter and progressive side of life; would try to maintain a balance between the centuries old haveli traditions and the demands of modern life. Dr. A.G. Khan points out that Geeta could obtain the —right of the girl for education irrespective of their class distinction, and, right of the mother to have a say in deciding marriage of her daughter. ... Similarly, child marriage was also delayed considerably --- a marvel in Rajasthan even today. (44)

The three major discourses – gender, class and tradition - create a complete study of the novel. The discourse on gender provides a feminist touch to the novel. It focuses on the identity-crisis, patriarchal notions and other gender issues. The second approach, deals with class system portrayed in the novel.

The conservative outlook holds back the restoration of religious dictates that affirms the sheepish role of women in her family. This submission of her identity is celebrated as the ‘honor of women’ which erodes her self-awareness and self-worth. Holding the vein of fiction Rama Mehta presents the blueprint of the mentality of last generation who considered nuptial relationship to be the solitary aspiration of women’s life. “May you have many many sons, my child, and may you always wear red” (p-33) The paper in depth analysis the position of women in a tradition bound society and though the revolution has begun which is being canonized by many writers and women themselves have reached the profound level of success devaluing gender inequality but it cannot be denied that the psyche of Indian women still needs to be reshaped which demands more concern and further research work afield.

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