

## Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*: Geeta's Balance between Tradition and Modernity

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*Inside the Haveli* (1977) by Rama Mehta, a Sahitya Academy Award winning novel belongs to that genre of fiction which deals with a society in transition. Late nineteenth century India is marked by the prominent social change. The conflict between the old values and the new often results in anger and heartbeat of painful confrontations and unwilling compromises. The protagonist in *Inside the Haveli*, Geeta being the city bred finds it hard to adjust in the traditional family. Geeta achieves her objectives with her zest and her understanding to the traditional customs. She balances between them and creates a niche for herself in the patriarchal set up.

The protagonist in *Inside the Haveli*, Geeta is born and brought up in a metropolitan city, Bombay. She has studied in a co-educational institution and has exposure to city life. When she turned nineteen she was married to Ajay Singh, a Professor of Science in the city Udaipur. Ajay's ancestors were the ministers of the Ranas the royal lineage of Udaipur and their haveli Jeevan Niwas was one of the biggest and most renowned havelis of Udaipur.

A well educated city bred young man or woman may be considered as a threat to a traditional orthodox family, the condition becomes worse if the person has been educated abroad. A well educated daughter or a daughter-in-law could be a valuable ornament and a cause of pride for the family at the same time a means of much uneasiness and discomfort. *Inside the Haveli* by Rama Mehta "is an example of this genre of fiction" comments Amaresh Datta in *The Encyclopedia of Indian Literature Vol.-II* (1723).

It is an immense cultural shock to an educated young woman like Geeta to cope up with the traditional ways of the haveli, wherein women keep purdha and have no freedom to move freely in front of the male members. Critics feel the veil is usually stereotyped as a signifier of female enslavement or as a means of controlling and confining women's space. Even female members are not supposed to talk to male members in the presence of family members. After marriage when Geeta lands in Udaipur she is criticized for being bare faced and made to feel that she is an outsider by the maids of the haveli who have come to welcome the new bride by their folklore at the railway station,

"Where do you come from that you show your face to the world" (ITH: 17).

It is strange for her to find separate apartments for the males and females of the haveli. There is a strict purdah observed by the women and they are not allowed to interact with their men folk during the day. Geeta has not seen the face of her father-in-law even after two years of her marriage. The whole haveli revolves round the needs and demands of the male members and their presence is felt every moment in every part of the haveli.

Geeta finds haveli as her confinement, a place where she is all the time surrounded by women, and her activities are observed and talked about. Before her marriage she is in a nuclear and educated family and her atmosphere at her maternal home is of ease and comfort with the liberty to do as she desires. On the contrary, her in-laws home the haveli where she is every time surrounded by the horde of maids, their children and women from her relations.

Geeta finds herself enclosed in the haveli; never leaves the walls and courtyards, except for short car excursion, heavily veiled. So much time is spent in the haveli over preparation and presentation of food, wearing of saris and bangles, and the overseeing of the many servants. Haveli hardly remains a private place for Geeta. She longs for solitude or privacy in haveli; she wants to be alone in conversations with her husband. Geeta observes the world from behind the purdha, her face always covered.

Geeta becomes submissive and weak in the haveli. The maids try to familiarize her with traditions of that hundred year old house. But still her activities are always awkward. Geeta is an object of curiosity for the women of other haveli. But her mother-in-law is having very concerned and sympathetic attitude towards her and she believes that "even an educated girl can be moulded" (ITH: 50). The loving and caring husband helps her in adjusting to the environment of the haveli. Geeta is encountered with this and other tradition that threatens to snuff out her independence and progressive views. Geeta struggles in mainstream the modern values that she has always lived by. Gradually Geeta accepts her role in the family and the beauty of the tradition. She accommodates herself to the ways of the haveli and recognizes the values of the tradition which she has long ago chafe against. Clara Nubile feels in *The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing* that the haveli itself "is one of the protagonists of the story the haveli represents a gendered spatiality as well as a stronghold of traditional values" (47).

The initial uneasiness of Geeta never really disappears. Geeta hopes that her husband move out from Udaipur after some time, it is a temporary phase. Ajay also told her that he will apply for position in Delhi, Geeta involves herself with the responsibilities in the haveli. Gradually she realizes that it is a dream to move out of Udaipur. Ajay on the other hand when gets position in Delhi could not move because of his desire to serve her parents. He shows his attachment to Indian tradition to serve her parents. Ajay makes Geeta realizes his wish to remain in his own city with his own people. Ajay encourages Geeta to mould the tradition and see what she could do in this atmosphere. He says, "This life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me to try and see what could you do in this atmosphere. You must always have confidence in me that I will support you in what ever you decide to do" (ITH: 52). Geeta understands that she has to support her husband anyhow.

In the beginning Geeta protests against the rules and restrictions of the society and its confined way of living, but in the end she adjusts herself to the custom and tradition of the haveli. With the passage of time, she accepts that the haveli represents tradition: "All these women had confidence born out of the hundred years of unbroken tradition was fortress protecting them from the outside

world, giving them secretly and sense of superiority" (ITH:114). Geeta recognizes the value of tradition. Tradition is a symbol of reassuring bond to the female of the haveli and provides a sense of belonging, security and shelter. Clara Nubile further comments that the Rama Mehta's heroines do want to cross "the boundaries of their upper caste haveli, their identity is defined and inscribed within the walls of the house" (47).

Some critics consider that there is a fixed pattern in the novels of the 1980's and the 1990's –new initial condition-quest-crisis-resolutions. This can be applied to the novel *Inside the Haveli* also. The new initial condition is revealed by Geeta moving from Bombay to the haveli in Udaipur to begin her married life; after then the quest phase comes when she goes against the customs and tradition followed in the haveli; for instance Geeta calls the children in the haveli to teach them especially girls and haveli turns into an informal school. Geeta faces criticism from her old relatives even her husband felt offended. It is Geeta's quest to create a space for herself in the traditional family. Geeta is concerned about the education of the girls and it is very clear from her intention after teaching the poor children. Geeta can not revolt so she seeks permission of her father-in-law the patriarchal head and about her decision and to everyone surprise he gave his permission and it makes Geeta's struggle bit easy. Geeta being a daughter-in-law and mother of two not only accomplishes her filial duties but also run her part time job efficiently maintaining a just balance between the two.

Geeta's concern for girl education is clearly seen when she strongly supports the education of her escaped maid servant's daughter, Sita. It reflects her futuristic attitude where she makes no discrimination between class and caste. It becomes the talk of the haveli when she fights for women education but later she got appreciation and respect for this decision. Geeta being conscious of her position in the haveli does what comes in her preview though she has to struggle to initiate anything as it is not easy to shackle the year old tradition and to mould them. Geeta with her modesty balanced everything and make a place for herself in the haveli.

Geeta struggles to seek strength and independence in the haveli. Through her inner determination she makes her own identity. Geeta does not stop with children education. She also thinks about women empowerment. When everyone takes siesta, she teaches maids how to read and write, and stitching to make them self-reliant. Gradually Geeta is seen as a savior among the maids. The maids who criticize her for her path breaking tendency now praise her.

Geeta becomes appreciative of the beauty of the tradition in the haveli and at the same time also works for liberating the servants and maids of Jeevan Niwas from the burden of the constructive customs. She cannot violate the traditional customs or overrule them on the other side she has to accomplish her set goals. Primarily, her objective is to educate women either maid servants or the women in neighbourhood and make them self reliant. Geeta with her activities faces much criticism but due to the permission from the patriarch she continues with her work. Time comes when she decides to stop her activities to restore the dignity of haveli as relatives' complaints about it. They feel that she wastes the time of maids who come here to listen to her story. They comment: "now this

very haveli is undermining our authority and making rebels out of our servants" (ITH: 165). This disturb Geeta a lot and she thinks, "How dare anyone say a word against the haveli," (ITH: 170). She makes up her mind and speaks about her decision to her mother-in-law. Amaresh Datta writes, " it is not the weight but the dimly perceived beauty of the tradition, of the idea of responsibility, that is finally responsible for the heroine Geeta's acceptance of her role in the family and its obligations, subordinating the personal inclination towards a freer, less constricted life" (1723).

Geeta asserts her identity while taking decision about her daughter's Vijay marriage. Though, she prefers Vir Singh, a boy from an esteemed family. She thinks it is too early to think about Vijay's marriage. She does not want Vijay to turn out to be any ordinary woman in the haveli. Geeta convinces both her father-in-law Bhagwat Singh ji and her husband regarding her decision concerning Vijay's future. Bhagwat Singh ji promises before his death, "let me get well soon than we will give proper thought to my granddaughter's future" (ITH: 59) Geeta finds a place in the haveli where her voice is heard before making any crucial decision.

The novel ends with the death of head of the family; Bhagwat Singh. Geeta gets a new role that is a mistress of Jeevan Niwas. Geeta understands that rules does not lie always in breaking away, but rather in getting within tradition with a comfortable space of one's own thus accomplishing a sustainable position in the haveli. Geeta while living in the patriarchal set up creates a space for herself where she finds a platform for mutual appreciation. A light is there without breaking tradition Geeta liberates herself from the constraints of haveli. She plans her strategy with positive attitude to educate girls or to improve the position of the maids working in the haveli. She uses her creative urges to make her own identity in the pull and push of patriarchal and orthodox society. R.K.Misra observes in "Psychological Exploration of Inner Mind of Indian Woman" that the novel "seeks to delineate the various possibilities of synthesizing two different antithetical concepts of tradition and modernity and amalgamating these heterogeneous ideologies. Geeta's objective is sociologically significant in rebuilding Indian society and family life by wedding these two concepts. The haveli represents tradition, narrowness, servitude of women and shackles of freedom" (53). Rama Mehta in *Inside the Haveli* presents true picture of the society and how women are being treated here. She talks about the emotional crisis faced by women in Indian society.

### Works Cited

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