



The Theme of Self-Discovery in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli

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Abstract: . Harmonising them is the need of the hour. Rama Mehta unlike other feminist writers does not see all Indian customs in dark light. She, as a sociologist studied them and found that they had cultural value. They were not meant to subjugate women but protect them from ugly forces of the social life. Women thus protected could perform their duties of rearing and educating children so well that they could create ideal society in the long run. The novelist focuses on the conflict and consciousness of women in Post-independent India.

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Rama Mehta established herself as a writer in the genre of women's writing by her only novel Inside the Haveli. Prior to it, she had produced her studies on two important aspects of Indian women indicated by the titles *The Western Educated Hindu Woman* (1970) and *The Divorced Hindu Woman* (1975). She wrote an article in 1976 entitled *From Purdah to Modernity*. All these articles served as a prelude to her novel Inside the Haveli. Rama Mehta's novel Inside the Haveli (1977) has been hailed as a classic that maintains strict authenticity to the life it portrays. The author herself was both a novelist and a leading sociologist, whose insight into the lives of women was based upon her own experiences of life in Udaipur (Rajasthan). The novel reveals Mehta's concern for women and her region's coexisting and conflicting trends of the time. It portrays the educated protagonist's journey towards consciousness and realisation. Self-discovery that leads to liberation is the main theme in the novel 'Inside the Haveli'. Rama wonderfully shows Geeta's

preoccupation with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within. She presents the image of an educated urban girl Geeta with progressive thinking who realizes herself as a caged bird in the oppressive environment of the haveli, and how she liberates herself from the old traditions and converts into the image of a cherished woman of the haveli. Geeta finds her interiority quite transformed ultimately.

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.

Rama Mehta's **Inside the Haveli** can be studied in the context of the autobiographical element. There is a significant resemblance with the life of the protagonist Geeta and the author's own. Her own female self interferes in the narrative. Rama Mehta was married into an aristocratic family of the Oswal community in the erstwhile Mewar state. The Oswals strictly followed the Purdah system. Rama Mehta has a credit of being appointed as the first woman in Indian Foreign Service and was married to Jagat Mehta, a fellow officer but was forced to resign after her marriage. From then on she resided at Udaipur, her husband's native place. All this echoes in Geeta, the focus of **Inside the Haveli**, who is an educated and vivacious girl. Malashri Lal says that, "Geeta, the protagonist of **Inside the Haveli** was a version of Rama Mehta and Geeta's experiences were much of the time, fabrications upon an edifice of her own responses to Udaipur." (90) In the title of the novel **Inside the Haveli** "inside" is assigned only to the women of the haveli. They have no space in the "outside" society.

The main theme of the novel concerns Geeta's alienation from the life of the haveli and her gradual acceptance of its mores and rules. Geeta's first encounter in the haveli itself reveals the fact that she has to live by its rigidly enforced codes of behaviour like veiling her face which signifies that veiling is nothing but suppression of her individuality. "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) Geeta at once realizes that as a daughter-in-law of the haveli, she has to draw a veil not only on her face, but also on her exuberance and individuality too and also surrender to the rigorous and conventional customs of the haveli.

Patriarchy is something inseparable from the structure of Rajput haveli's tradition. Geeta is also conscious of the fact that her parents' house varies from Jeevan Niwas, "in her parents' home men and women talked quite freely.....' But 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) Basically havelis are male centered. According to its tradition the head of the family has immense power to implement on the family members which is undeniable. While executing his power, often the head of the family overlooks the inconvenience of the family members and makes the decisions not to violate the traditional norms. "Though to her they were only names, their presence was felt everywhere in the haveli. Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved". The freedom of choice for women is hardly expected especially in Jeevan Niwas. It seems that against the patriarchal power of domination, Geeta's relationship with the members of her family forms a battlefield. "In the two years Geeta.....she was unable to control either her words or her feelings.....because of this her mother-in-law kept reminding her of the



importance of reticence.”(33) Here, she only intends for a liberty of her own. In the novel the protagonist’s patriarchal in-laws stand for the power. Rama Mehta wants to seize a female space by challenging the age-old order- the multitude bondages of tradition enforced by a male-dominated society.

The novelist deals with some aspects of patriarchal religious traditions that involve superstitions sanctify the rigid codes of conduct expected from women. In this novel, the heroine Geeta begins her re-education in the traditional behaviour of “respectable” women, when she first lifts back her sari from her face to look at the vast walls of the haveli. “No, no, you cannot do that’, she is advised and the sari is pulled down over face.” (17) Mehta portrays the rigidity of the class system within constraints of purdah system, which can detach haveli women’s access to other women in order to prohibit cross-class contact and friendship. Rama shows the veil system in a satirical way “In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.”(17) It is a way of controlling women’s accessibility to the outside world. Veiling is an effective way of disallowing any rebellious activism or knowledge of changing values and attitudes that can be learnt from the outside walls of the haveli.

Geeta is able to comprehend the fact that along with physical veiling, emotions must also be hidden in the haveli. Geeta finds that the other women in the haveli though they never expressed their feelings, “They followed the traditions of their families at the bidding of their elders, but they lacked the same faith or commitment to it. It seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when they would be freed from their

confinement. But on the surface they showed no dissatisfaction. (87) Geeta cannot remain silent like them, during the times of extreme predicament, Geeta burns with fury, anger or aggravation, yet remains silent. The fact that Geeta eventually accepts the discipline of the haveli without protest highlights the opportunity, within the traditional forms of seclusion. Here ‘the novelist has given due stress on the mental crisis of the protagonist and her spirit to face the situations in life.’(Kulkarni 227) Geeta understands that, it is necessary for any women not to express her concerns or anxieties to anyone according to the traditions of the haveli for the survival of a woman.

Geeta’s induction into this closed world of haveli compels her to accept it as the only way of respectable living. The other noticeable fact is that men interact with the outside world, but women are supposed to linger within the closed system in order to preserve the values. It takes almost fifteen years for Geeta to adjust herself to the life of haveli. It is her mother-in-law’s love and concern that win her heart and draw her into the life of haveli. Thus Geeta is to adjust herself to the life of haveli. Geeta is growing into the “web of relations,” herself. Though Geeta has accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest, there are many times “She was filled with rebellion and her face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the haveli.” (88). Dr. A.G. Khan rightly avers that “Mehta deserves commendation that she did not allow her protagonist to succumb to stagnation or helplessness.”(43) It is Geeta who stimulates the inhabitants of the Haveli into a silent transformation that is provided by education and awakening. It



is interesting that the changes in human environment are brought about by a woman. Geeta is neither a rebel nor a radical feminist but in her own quiet way she brings about changes in the lives of young girls in the family and outside.

Geeta does not fully conform to the old customs of the haveli, but she understands some of its values. That is why the confrontation to it is not violent. Geeta starts teaching women from all classes of society. Initially there is a lot of resistance by different complaints about the disadvantages of literacy for women especially from servant folks "Hukkum have you heard that the engagement of my brothers daughter has been broken off; who wants a girl who is already defiant?" (162) "another woman spoke 'If these girls are not careful, they will soon find their men deserting them, and then the haveli will have to give them shelter?'" (162) but their criticism does not discourage her and she is determined to empower the servants and their children through education. With the support of her in-laws and her husband she is able to send Sita and Ravi to school. She herself runs her own "school" and teaches servants, their children and the daughters of the haveli. For those who find it impossible to read and write, Geeta starts sewing classes and engages a woman to teach them to cut and embroider. The substantial effect of all these efforts is that they get economic independence. "Binniji has changed the lives of these girls... most of them now can read and write; they can get work." (191) The noticeable thing is that Geeta is proudly identified as 'the haveli's greatest ornament "by her patriarchal in-laws. Her deeds are trusted to be worthy even by her father-in-law." 'I am proud of Binniji. Tell her to let know if she needs

any help', "Bhagwat Singhji said." (158) He also expresses his consent to send Sita to school. "'Education is good thing. I know it is not the custom in Udaipur to send girls to school. People are afraid of marrying educated girls. But times are changing' he said, looking at her intently." (103)

Geeta achieves another victory when she does not agree to the proposal of engagement of her very young daughter, Vijay, with a well bred, educated young man from another haveli. "I won't agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child." (206). She makes it clear by informing "'My daughter's marriage is my concern. I will never agree to Vijay's engagement like this, no matter what happens. Even if it were the son of Maharana of Udaipur, I would not agree' replied Geeta." (215) and she tells her husband that she cannot "be fooled again. I know nothing matters more than money and prestige to you all." (207) At the same time, in Geeta we find a harmonious blending of the positive phases of tradition and modernity. The striking thing in Geeta's attitude is Geeta refuses the engagement of her daughter at such an early age but she agrees with mother-in-law to get Sita married (servant's daughter) since she feels Sita will be benefited through the marriage which can provide security for her. Geeta consents to the marriage because she comes to understand that for the poor it was important to abide by family customs, otherwise they would lose the family's approval. Thus Geeta, the new mistress of the haveli, has transformed traditions, fought her battles, and achieved her victory at the same time accepted positive concepts of the customs and traditions.



In post-independence India, patriarchal hierarchy co-existed with a developing democratic ethos. Modern women are emerged like Geeta they were shaped by old traditions and strengthened by the power of education they have acquired. These women by liberating themselves from the hold of male authority, they are able to control the social conditions that raise the economic and educational opportunities of women. As Sushila Singh puts it, "Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete." (7) In this novel Rama Mehta craves to provide the complete image of humanity by portraying Geeta as a humanist in action that she is able to modify tradition and recognize the social forms. She herself undergoes change and brings about a change through her action. This modern, educated woman, belonging to the upper class of society, schools the other women and is responsible for the arousal of "humanist consciousness" in both the men and women of the haveli. Geeta finally emerges as a humanist who has opened the way for the other women to free themselves from the constrained reality of their lives. She offers the way for a positive change by means of education, protesting against child marriage and differential treatment of boys and girls. She has opened up new horizons of possibilities arousing a sense of self-worth and self- esteem in women.

At the end of the novel Geeta achieves self-discovery and asserts herself as an individual by putting an end to her doubts about herself. She is able to hold her own self in a household full of traditional-bound, royal, venerable, noble

and well- mannered members of her family in the haveli. It is a proof of her individuality. She breaks traditional ground whenever it is necessary. She takes complete care to delineate her presence as one shows it with bravery and confidence of rationale and accountability to be a mistress of the haveli. She emerges as an intelligent, impressive and wholly practical woman. The novel ends neither with the victory nor the defeat but of accord and indulgence that explores Geeta's awareness, self-discovery and matured psyche.

It is **concluded** that she accepts that she was a willing prisoner in the haveli. She realizes that the haveli had given her immense love and concern. She says that her children must grow up there and learn to love and respect the ancient house. Geeta becomes the mistress of the haveli and decides to help the haveli in preserving its dignity and honour. Rama Mehta suggests noble traditions must be preserved. Modernity must come but it must never uproot good traditions. Harmonising them is the need of the hour. Rama Mehta unlike other feminist writers does not see all Indian customs in dark light. She, as a sociologist studied them and found that they had cultural value. They were not meant to subjugate women but protect them from ugly forces of the social life. Women thus protected could perform their duties of rearing and educating children so well that they could create ideal society in the long run. Thus Geeta, the future mistress of the haveli, transformed traditions, fought her battles, and has achieved her victory at the same time accepted positive concepts of the customs and traditions.



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