

Feminist Consciousness in Rama Mehta's Novel *Inside The Haveli*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore and evaluate the position of women in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli*. This novel is a voice against the custom-ridden society in Udaipur city in Rajasthan, India which strictly holds the *purdah* for the women in the haveli. The servants, their children and ladies tolerate all the suppression under the pressure of the strict rules of the haveli. It also highlights how the days come in servants' life when they also are conscious about their fundamental rights. The maids of the haveli don't have time for rest and long for a delivery to take rest and widows' are hapless and sapless in the haveli and they accept all the sufferings considering it their predestined destiny. All the youth girls and women, though, are in the search of their emancipation but cannot dare to make a start to oppose the family traditions. The ladies inside the haveli keep telling their stories of woes to one another but do nothing that shows their helplessness. Each lady is waiting for the initiative taken by someone. This paper assesses how a cosmopolitan girl, Geeta from Mumbai brings a change by breaking the codes. She starts girls' education and puts a ban on child marriage in her family.

Key Words: Tradition, *purdah*, depression, neurosis, consciousness, education, child marriage.

Inside the Haveli is a novel that delineates a few bad customs like *purdah*-tradition, narrow-mindedness, women exploitation, girls' illiteracy and child marriage prevailed in a Rajputana haveli of Udaipur in Rajasthan, India that is symbolic of prevalence of all these bad customs, rituals and rules in all over India. The novel is an attack on the orthodoxy and traditionalism of that man-dominated society. Almost whole story revolves around the haveli where females are deprived of their rights and liberty and where the birth of a girl-child is considered bad. The birth of the girls even in the novel has been followed by a storm. This birth of two girls proves really turbulent for the family and that's why storm has become a symbol of a revolution in the haveli. Two girls Sita, a daughter of salve, Gangaram; and Vijay, the daughter of the mistress of the haveli, are born the same night. Servant's wife is attended by a midwife Sarju but Geeta by a young doctor. The discrimination of the class is seen at the very outset. Then Sita's father Gangaram predicts to hear her cry, "It is a girl" and he is disappointed for this, "Gangaram took a long puff of his bide and then threw it away in disgust" (Mehta 7). At this Khyali, the cook who was also sitting in the verandah for the news of the child consoles Gangaram saying, "Girls are a burden I admit but what can one do once they are born" (Mehta 8). Gangaram predicts that his mistress Geeta will give birth to a male baby and curses his fate, "Young mistress of course she will get a boy. The rich always get what they want; it is the poor who have all the bad luck" (Mehta 15). Another aspect of the servants' life emerges when Pari, the oldest maid tells that she has not taken rest for twelve hours though there are fifteen servants in the haveli out of which eight are maid servants. She tells, "I have been on the feet for the last twelve hours" (Mehta 8). When lady doctor tries to maintain cleanliness and silence for Geeta's post-natal care, she comments, "The doctors think having a baby is like having an operation. "Be quiet, don't talk, wash this, boil that. "What a fuss for nothing. Sarju has delivered ten babies in the very room, but I have never seen this kind of fuss before" (Mehta 10).

Udaipur is a part of desert land, Rajasthan where servants come by the destitute parents who have no money to feed their children. They leave their children as servants in these havelis to avoid them dying from hunger. Pari is one of such children and she comes to haveli when she is only ten years old. She gets married after two years and becomes widow only at the early age. When the novel opens she has been rendering her services in the haveli since forty five years as a widow and she "had already known four generations of the family, shared in the joys of births and of marriages, in the sorrow of death and misfortunes of the haveli" (Mehta 9). She has now acquires a prestigious place in the haveli, "The new daughters-in-laws looked to her for guidance and followed her instructions when they came to the haveli as brides" (Mehta 9-10). She tells

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her story of sorrow to Lakshmi, the mother of Sita to soothe her, “Look at me though I have been a widow almost all my life, I am still not free of my in-laws...I have never have a penny left after the demands of my in-laws. And what do I get from them? Nothing. Not even a blouse. But I don’t complain. We all have to accept fate. This is no escape from that” (Mehta 12). It seems that each lady seems to brag her story of suffering in front of other and motivates others also to bear the sufferings silently. Pari says to him, “Which man can put up with a wife who does not make him comfortable” (Mehta 12)? Another aspect of her life emerges when one knows that the age of Lakshmi is little over fifteen and she has given birth to a girl. She is also fed up with the tight working schedule in the haveli. She says that the only way to get rest in the haveli for the maids is to give birth to a child otherwise they must be at work, “I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and only for twenty one days” (Mehta 12).

Like these widow Manji Bhua Sa also considers her life a burden on her and she spends all her youth in widowhood. She tells her story, “The days and life are long in her widowed life. She lost her husband at the age of fourteen, since then she has been living in the haveli admitting that it is her fate (Mehta 134). Like her when Kanta, a cousin-in-law also mixes her tune of destiny like Bhua Sa, Geeta gets annoyed at this and says, “It was criminal to accept as part of one’s predestined fate (Mehta 134). And she finds “women rooted in ignorance and superstition” (Mehta 137). Geeta finds that it is due to these bad customs of the haveli. Bhua Sa and maid-servant, Pari has to live a life of widowhood otherwise it was time for both of these that they can be easily remarried but again customs and strict rules of Rajputana family don’t allow them to remarry. Not only this, they can neither wear coloured saris nor can’t taste sumptuous food. All the women accept all this as their fate and never dare to find fault with the society openly who has made these disgraceful rules. Servants and maids live a life like a slave in the family and their duties become tight if there is any problem in the haveli, especially with children “the servants go hungry if the children haven’t eaten, they would go without sleep if a child has a slight headache (Mehta 137). These traditions were deep-rooted in the haveli. Other girls and women of her age in other havelis were feeling like Geeta who want to take a fight towards emancipation. Gaikwad also contends, “It seems to her that they are waiting to be freed from the confinement (Gaikwad 167). But like all others they were not bold enough to take any step. That’s why Geeta, the main protagonist of the novel, thinks that it will take time to bring a change in the haveli.

Almost remaining whole story of the novel is about Geeta who is brought up in Mumbai city in a free environment where she was free at home as well as outside. At home, she saw her parents co-operating each other and outside she had taken her education in co-educational institutions. In her home also “there was a free mingling of men and women” (Mehta 15). When she grows young, one day a boy comes to her house with her brothers’ friends to see her and she even does not know which boy has come to see her and on being asked she says ‘yes’ to her parents for marriage. The boy who came to see her at her home was a professor in Physics, “Ajay come from an old aristocratic family of Udaipur but he, unlike many in such families, was highly educated. He was a science professor” (Mehta 15-6). She gets married with him. Her mother generally tells her to obey her in-laws and talk less for a successful married life. She goes from Mumbai to the last station (probably Udaipur) in a train. When she puts her first step on the platform, she finds her encircled by women. Unexpectedly one maid comes forwards and pulls Geeta’s sari on her face and exclaimed in horror, “Where do you come from that you show your face to the world” (Mehta 17). She sits in a four-seater Fiat car along with her two cousin-in-laws and four women. She sits in the car with difficulty with so many persons and feels suffocation. As she was already rebuked for not observing *purdah*, she could not dare to lower the glass of the car.

In the haveli, she finds the atmosphere she has never dreamt of. She is considered not an important person in the haveli as a new bride rather she is considered a part of the women world that is born to suffer and totally depends upon the fate. She always has a fear in her mind as she does not know the rules of haveli. Everybody tells her to do this and don’t do this. It has been two years in the haveli and she has not seen her husband’s father and grandfather. Thus, the male family members become strangers for her. She is not

allowed to see or talk even to her husband during the whole day. "Like everyone else in the haveli there was a form that men maintained too" (Mehta 21). Ajay mildly breaks the rules of the haveli. He sometimes goes upstairs on some excuses to meet her for a short period, yet she feels distress and dejected. Her life becomes a prison like the protagonist of Anita Nair's novel, *Radha* who is a middle class girl belonging to a traditional family. She gets education, job and even lover but is not satisfied with her life. She marries to Shyam and is forced to become the traditional woman she had never to decide between her independence and traditionalism while at the beginning of her marriage, decides "never to flout the rules of custom again," (Nair 54). Radha demands her right from her husband, Shyam, "Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights" (Nair 72)).

Geeta's husband, Ajay could comfort her only at night but days become like a year for her. Gaikwad compares this life to her life in Bombay before marriage, "It is in Bombay her father is always ready to respond to the children's questions, no matter how busy he is" (Gaikwad 168). In the novel *Inside the Haveli*, one day when Geeta notices that there are no servants nearby she enters the males' apartment out of curiosity. Then Pari, the old maid-servant scolds her severely and calls her an outsider. This thing always pinches her that even the maids of haveli dare to call her an outsider notwithstanding she is now mistress of the haveli. But she never protests against it. She faces many other problems in the haveli as she has to keep purdah and inside the walls of haveli she feels uncomfortable. Shahji Gaikwad says about it, "Educated and brought up in a free cosmopolitan air, Geeta feels suffocated in the haveli" (Gaikwad 166). But she notices a strange thing, Rajasthani code of behavior and dominance of her in-laws in Udaipur, "Whole city belonged to her in-laws. Every gate they passed, the maids stand up erect and with pride... (Mehta 21). She is neither allowed to go outside nor is allowed to roam about the whole haveli. She goes outside only at some special occasions. She feels jealous of the outside women who live their life in free air when she goes to her relatives at one of such occasions, "As the car slowed down Geeta saw the eager faces of shopper staring at the car, and she envied their freedom. They were to choose saris from a hundred different shades and dresses, but she could select only from the bundle that the accountant brought to the house" (Mehta 88). She remains a stranger in the haveli for a long time, "Even after seven years I am strangers to those that I am mine, and I will always remain stranger" (Mehta 105). When this purdah becomes a problem for her and she tells her about it to her husband. Then Ajay says to her, "I know, it is difficult for you here, but Geeta; by being depressed you will not change this... This life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me try and see what you could do in this atmosphere. You must always have confidence in me that I will support you in whatever you decide to do" (Mehta 52-53). Geeta tries to persuade Ajay to go to Delhi so that they may get rid of this atmosphere. But Ajay, due to some family reasons and his limitations, refuses for that. Geeta also accepts it as her fate. She says, "I don't want to leave. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds" (Mehta 137).

This story of a Mumbai girl also reminds us the story of a Kolkata girl, Dimple Das Gupta whose story also matches with that of Geeta. Geeta's dreams of marriage shatter like Dimple Das Gupta, a Bengali girl in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* in which Dimple also thinks that marriage would bring her love and freedom. She wants a life of glamour, affluence and independence, "She wanted a different life - an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris - so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects" (Mukherjee 3). But her dreams of an affluent and colourful married life are badly broken when she is married to Amit Kumar Basu, a young engineer who fails to give her comforts she imagined for her married life because this marriage has not "provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine 'kababs' rolled in 'roti'" (Mukherjee 101-2). Amit was of a middle family and only an engineer who fails to provide her all materialistic comforts that she dreamt of, "she wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not. Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the

provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette tape recorder, stereo in their order of convenience” (Mukherjee 113)

Time passes and Geeta's daughter Vijay grows and she starts going to school. Geeta's daughter Vijay and Lakshmi's daughter were of the same age and due to childlike curiosity, one day Vijay asks her mother, "If I can go to school, why can't Geeta? This question of her daughter troubles her so much that she now starts thinking of sending Sita also to school like Vijay. Over a discussion, she says, "Parijiji, Sita must go to school". Then Pari replies reluctantly, "Binniji, Sita is a child of a servant. [S]He cannot go to school (Mehta 98). Manji Bua Sa, a cousin of Bhagwat Singhji tells Geeta that servants' daughter's sending to school can disturb the life of haveli. She appreciates Geeta for motivating the servants' daughters to go to school, "I am glad you are bringing new ideas in the haveli (Mehta 115). Ajay is happy that his wife is doing what he is unable to do being an obedient son of his father. He excites Geeta time to time to take challenges saying that he will be always with her, "As long as I am with you, no one dare lift a finger against you (Mehta 166). Chotte Lal Khartri also argues, "In this enterprise Ajay always stands by her as a docile fellow" (Khatri 106). He also laughs at her victory and thinks that her efforts will bring a change in the haveli, "You did the right thing. I am proud of you. It is time for the new ideas to enter the haveli (Mehta 137). Geeta starts a literacy campaign in the haveli for servants' children and other women of the haveli. As she starts, children begin to come for studying, "The next day after breakfast the boys stood Geeta's room and so from that day she started teaching them" (Mehta 160). This news is a revolutionary step for her and the other servants. Later maids also join her classes, "News of the classes spread like monsoon floods and the young maids from the haveli came and joined the children. At first they just listened to the stories... (Mehta 160).

She is, hardly able to unravel this riddle of education then a blow from another quarter comes when a marriage proposal is placed for Vijay Bai from the rival haveli. Geeta bursts out, "What a mistake I made to stay here, I could have easily persuaded Ajay to leave. This had to come sooner or later. Now I am really trapped and cannot escape. But on this point I will never give in., whatever happens. If I have ruined my life, the children are not going to lose theirs" (Mehta 164). She needed nobody to support her in her battle. She wants to fight it alone, "She did not need anyone to fight on her behalf or give her moral support (Mehta 169). The boy, Vir Singh was still reading in a college, though he belonged to an affluent family of Udaipur. But she is not ready to accept this proposal of a child marriage, "My daughter's marriage is my concern. I will never agree to Vijay's engagement like this. Even if it were the son of Udaipur, I wouldn't agree" (Mehta 171). Vijay's child marriage proposal adds fuel in the fire and she gets more furious, "I won't ever agree at this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child (Mehta 206) and she also comments, "I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college" (Mehta 206).

Thus Geeta is successful by changing the rules of that custom-ridden haveli though she has to break the rules of the haveli and has to disobey and displease her in-laws but this is how she is successful in her motives. When Pari says that Vir Singh is an educated and belongs to a well-to-do family and will be suitable match, father-in-law says "I have told Daulat Singh that under no circumstances would I permit Vijay to be taken out of school. I am against early marriage. Girls must study, they cannot be kept ignorant. She is now the real mistress of the haveli who changes the traditions of the haveli. Manji says, "Don't cry Binniji! You are now the mistress of this haveli..." who forgets the traditions of the haveli contrary to Manji's statement, "...you can't forget its traditions in your sorrow" (Mehta 208).

Conclusively, it can be said that girls face many problems; sometimes before marriage like Ammu in the novel *The God of Small Things* as her parents are so poor that they cannot give dowry in Ammu's marriage "since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu's way" (Roy 38) and after marriage also sometimes they find shocking situations waiting for them like Geeta in inside the haveli and Deepika in *Wife*. In order to get justice, identity, and liberty Ammu and Baby

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Kochamma *The God of Small Things*; Deepika Das Gupta from *Wife and Geeta in Inside the Haveli* have to cross the lines in order to achieve their goals of life.

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