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Unveiling the Veiled: Study of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

Dr. Sachin L. Patki

Assistant Professor in English
Adarsh Education Society's ACS College,
Hingoli.(Maharashtra).

Rama Mehta was an Indian sociologist and writer, who is remembered above all for her Sahitya Academy winning novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977). The novel *Inside the Haveli* deals with the women's conflict especially with the main or central woman character of the novel, Geeta, who is educated woman. This paper is a treatise on the theme of Unveiling the Veiled in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli*. As such, it presents a detailed study of the veiled state of the women flock in the havelis of Udaipur and how Geeta, the protagonist, successfully unveils herself by remaining veiled.

Introduction:

Rama Mehta's novel 'Inside the Haveli' (1977), the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979, reads more like 'an authentic sociological study' than a work of art, for it project, in a very realistic way, the life of a section of people, particularly women of a traditional haveli in Udaipur, the erstwhile centre of the Ranas in Rajasthan. It presents an intimate picture of the traditional system, which existed since the feudal times and also reveals the attitude towards women and their status that lived behind veils. As such, Rama Mehta essentially presents herself as a feminist, for her novel is a beautiful example of feminist writing wherein a young girl is the protagonist. Geeta's trials and tribulations and her struggle to maintain the modern values and carve out her own identity in a new and ostensibly stifling environment makes it a feminist novel. The story hinges on a young girl Geeta who has necessarily to be veiled but who successfully unveils herself not by protest or rebellion but by her mild and meek, silent and sublime ways of behavior.

Social Status of Indian Women through the Ages –

Since ancient times the Indian society has accorded a paradoxical view about women. On one hand, women are considered to be frail and weak, and so they need to be protected behind walls and veils. This view is upheld since the Vedic Age, when the ancient sage Manu, the giver of law, declared in his 'Manusmriti', that a woman is unworthy of freedom as she cannot stand by herself. Women were supposed to be mere "Chattels" taking pride in patience and sufferings.

On the other hand, women are also considered to be incarnations of goddesses and are worshipped as Durga, Kali, Laxmi and Swaraswati. This image or idea about women, upheld by our society is not deniable, and when they are equated to and worshipped as goddesses, what more do they need? However, the reality is that they are either turned into inanimate golden statues of goddesses and are expected to be quintessence of 'perfect woman' or they are exploited under the name of security and protection. These two different views about

women, which started since the Vedic Age, still persist in the Indian society in varying degrees.

The Veiled Status of Women in ‘Inside the Haveli’ –

Mehta’s novel, which is fictionalized version of her own article ‘From Purdah to Modernity’ based on an academic study and published in *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, presents a life behind purdah. In presenting such a life the novel focuses particular attention on Geeta, the young modern educated Bombayite girl whose marriage with Ajay Singh, a university professor in the city of Udaipur, introduces her to one of the most orthodox families of Udaipur and the consequent conflicts as well as metamorphosis which arises when Mehta yokes the new ideas of Geeta and the old customs and traditions of the haveli.

Geeta, the protagonist, was born and brought up in the metropolis of Bombay where there was no discrimination between males and females. She had attended a co-education college. As a result of her upbringing she had developed a very lively, enthusiastic and spontaneous nature. She had not been taught to stint in giving affection; nor was she taught to keep her feeling concealed. Her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind in a forthright manner. Nor was she accustomed to the purdah system. After her marriage she is physically shifted from Bombay to one of the havelis in Udaipur which ‘encompasses a microcosm of traditional values’ that were once upon a time common to Mewar where the women were veiled from the modern world.

The women of the upper class in Udaipur remained veiled-in-purdah. They were not permitted to go about with their heads uncovered even in front of their family members. When Geeta gets down at the Udaipur station with her husband, a crowd of inquisitive women surround her and Pari, the chief maid of the Haveli, pulls her sari over her face and exclaims in horror - “Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?” she further adds – “In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face”. Geeta slowly realizes that the soft and silken veil was going to work like iron bars for the rest of her life.

The women’s world was totally segregated from that of the men’s. They were not allowed to trespass into the man’s apartments. When one day Geeta goes there she is caught by Pari who tells her in a severe tone: “In this section of the haveli women come only when properly escorted”.

Women seldom went out of the haveli, and when they did, they were properly escorted. In the haveli the daughters-in-law were subject to unwritten but rigid rules that they must be docile and obedient, silent unless spoken to, they were never expected to voice an opinion. They were supposed to follow, unquestioningly, every instruction of the older women, especially the mother-in-law, and even privileged senior maids.

Women had only a second place in the haveli and were treated as inferior to men. Hence, the birth of a girl child was not welcomed. Instead, girls were thought to be a burden. Khyali, the cook says, “Girls are a burden, I admit, but what can one do once they are born?” The daughters in the haveli, unlike the sons, did not get the share of property on their father’s death. They were given their share of gold when they got married.

In the havelis of Udaipur, education and employment for the girls, especially of the servant class, was not only considered to be impractical but also unimaginable. Some orthodox women even felt that it was a crime to educate them. Bhagwat Singhji says, “People are afraid of marrying educated girls”. The general notion was that a girl who was to live in a village must be sturdy, be strong enough to plough the fields and collect the cow dung. Education, on the other hand, was supposed, would make them useless. Similarly, it was considered to be an intolerable disgrace to have a daughter-in-law earning a wage.

Child marriage was much in practice and girls were married at a very early age. Kanwarini Sa regarded marriage as the only and ultimate security for girls. As a result, child widows were large in number and they could not be gay and free like other children. The widows wore only gray and black and were not allowed to wear bangles. Pari and Manji were the victims of the child marriage and they proclaimed to the world the pathetic condition of the sufferings of child widows.

Surprisingly, though the women of the havelis were subject to such subjugation, suffering, humility and purdah, they were the chief guardians in upholding such customs and traditions. Ladies, especially like Kanwarini Sa, Pari and Dhapu tell Geeta about the ethics and mores of the haveli- what a daughter-in-law should do and should not do. In general, their ideas were medieval in time and they posed challenge to any change.

Unveiling the Veiled:

Geeta, being an emancipated woman, finds the haveli atmosphere suffocating, stifling and constricting especially for having to undergo the humiliating experience of being in veil and to endure an elaborate deliberate curbing of one’s natural feelings. She, however, does not register her protest openly to anyone in the hope that she will be able to leave the haveli once her husband finds a place for himself in Delhi University. However, things do not change at the speed of human desires. Even after three years of Geeta’s stay in the haveli, and in spite of Ajay’s awareness of her difficulties in the haveli, Geeta, to her disappointment, learns how deep were Ajay’s roots in Udaipur, and how impossible it was for him to go away when his aging father, Bhagwat Singhji, needed him most. Geeta’s knowledge of this totally shatters her dream of leaving Udaipur in the future. It finally dawns on her that she will have to unveil herself from the veil of the age old traditions and customs of the haveli and carve out her own identity by accepting the haveli as a permanent part of her life.

Mehta has affectively shown the way in which Geeta wins freedom for herself, how she unveils herself by remaining veiled. This freedom or unveiling of herself is no doubt a

slow but steady process. Geeta stands against the outdated customs and traditions not by leaving the haveli but by living in the haveli and confronting trials and tribulations.

Geeta's first step in unveiling herself as well as her unveiling of what was hitherto veiled in the haveli and bringing about the 'winds of change' starts when the question of schooling Sita rocked the haveli. One morning when Vijay asks Sita to go to school with her, Dhapu scolds her sharply and dragged Sita away. But Geeta observes to Pari that if Vijay could go to school, Sita should too. Pari is horrified at the very idea of educating a servant's child and exposing her to the outer world. However, when it was suggested to Bhagwat Singhji through Dhapu, he, though aware of the fact that it was not the custom in Udaipur to send the girls to schools and that people were afraid marrying educated girls, gives his consent for the schooling of Sita.

Though unwittingly, Geeta's concern for the unlettered children and women around her heralded second more serious crises. Geeta is aware that the servant's children and the young maids of the havelis in Udaipur were not privileged to attend schools. Hence, she starts teaching, first a small orphan boy and then a group of children. Later the young maids of the havelis too join the classes. Soon they were able to recognize and understand words. Bhagwat Singhji took interest in her classes and so instructed his accountant to pay all the expenses for the classes from his own account and even gave Geeta two sewing machines for the use of those women who found it impossible to read and write. The mistress was tolerant towards Geeta Classes. However, soon a group of women visited Kanwarini Sa and complained about the ill effects of the classes. Three months later Kanwarini Sa visited by her Nandu Bua Sa and Manji. Nandu severely criticized them for allowing Geeta to teach the poor children and maids and 'making rebels out of our servants'. Even Manji who still approved of Sita's schooling agreed that the girls were simply using the excuse to shirk work. Kanwarini Sa's pride was hurt and she almost broke down for the first time over such criticism in her life. Geeta was enraged and bitterly castigates herself for her own impulsive behavior in starting the classes. She is, however, astonished, gratified and touched to the heart when her mother-in-law says that Geeta was not to be disturbed by Nandu's remarks and so the classes for the maids are not to be discontinued.

Geeta's gradual process of unveiling reaches its pinnacle when she plays an important part in deciding the marriage of Sita and later that of Vijay. Shivram was a perfect match for Sita but the bridegroom's family made a condition that Sita should discontinue school at once. This arouses Geeta and now, as she has established herself as a 'new woman' and made a place for herself in the family, she speaks and demands to know what right Shivram's family had over Sita even before marriage.

Similarly, it is Geeta's position in the household now that her outrage over the thought of her thirteen year old daughter, Vijay, being given in marriage postpones the decision which is uncommon even in today's Udaipur. She has successfully achieved the right for the mother to have a say in deciding the marriage of her daughter, a right which previously rested entirely with the grandparents and the father.

It is the result of Geeta's consistent efforts to bring about changes that the etiquette which completely separated her from her father-in-law in the initial years of her life in the haveli has now been relaxed. In her present position, she is allowed to sit in his presence and even talk to him directly.

However, it should not go unmentioned in our discussion that Kunwarani Sa's 'not uncompromising' attitude towards Geeta's new concepts and ideas, her husband Ajay's constant encouragement and Bhagwat Singhji's approval and support goes a long way in helping Geeta to introduce new ideas and concepts and in unveiling herself as an emancipated woman. Similarly, it is her subservient role and mild nature that earns for her Bhagwat Singhji's esteem and affection. However, Geeta in her process to change the rigid and outdated customs and practices prevalent in the haveli, do not herself remain unchanged. Initially the imposing haveli seemed to her as a prison but later she understands the security, warmth, care and comfort that the haveli provided. She understands that behind the hard shell of the haveli there is also a sweet kernel of compassion. Geeta now develops a sense of belonging to the haveli. The writer says, " Geeta no longer felt trapped in the haveli... she had seen the value of kinship ties and wanted to preserve the ancestral dignity of the haveli" by being the future mistress of Jeewan Niwas.

Conclusion –

The main focus in Rama Mehta's, *Inside the Haveli* is on the veiled status of Indian women, particularly that of a traditional haveli of Udaipur in Rajasthan. The novel carries the readers mentally deep inside the haveli – Jeewan Niwas, and reveals the age old traditions, superstitions, joys and sorrows, sufferings and celebrations to the readers. Above all, we feel after reading the text, Mehta has emphasized the fact that unveiling is possible even when being in veil; and that how through patience and sufferings one can attain freedom and achieve sublime heights.

Like Shaw's *Candida*, Geeta is essentially a 'new woman' who morally courageous, full of new ideas and is guided by reason. She, unlike, Lakshmi or Ibsen's *Nora* who are impulsive, does not go out into the darkness of the night by slamming the door on her husband's face. Geeta continues living in the haveli and very gradually but surely introduces new concepts to rid the haveli of some outworn and outmoded practices and concepts.

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