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A Study of Women in the Hindu Nuclear Family in Rama Mehta's *Inside The Haveli*

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Abstract:

This paper explores a study of women in the hindu nuclear family in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli*. The novel 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. The novel beautifully delineates an urban educated and vivacious girl; Geeta's strangulation-like suffocation in a traditional rule-lover aristocratic family where purdah is must to observe for the ladies. The paper accesses on how Geeta arranges to be fitted in the most orthodox family of Udaipur and in the haveli. She transgresses man-made rules and emerges as a new Indian woman by starting literacy campaign in that man dominated haveli. It is an orientation of emancipation by Geeta how she manages to carve out her own identity in that ostensibly stifling environment in which she is flung to. She does not stop until she gets back on an even keel.

Keywords: family, Rama Mehta, women, purdah, orthodox, haveli, Indian, Hindu, identity.

INTRODUCTION

In modern era, women are considered as staunch supporters of men. In ancient times, only men had right to educate and serve the society. Girls were not allowed to school to learn and educate themselves. As there exists no feminist text that may actually reveal their position. Forbes states that "the pre-British records include an abundance of prescriptive texts but fewer documents that shed light on the actual lives of women" (Forbes 18).

Inside the Haveli is an excellent novel about a young, college-educated girl of Bombay who marries the son of an ex-prime minister of the former princely state of Mewar and comes to her husband's traditional haveli in Udaipur. The moment she steps out of the train, however, Geeta gets the biggest shock of her life, for not only is her face instantaneously covered by her women relatives and maid-servants who take complete charge of her, but she also immediately finds herself engulfed in a pattern of life which is totally alien to her modern upbringing in Bombay.

As soon as she reaches “home”, she is further shocked by the realisation that the men and women live in different parts of the huge haveli, without any contact with each other. Indeed, life inside the haveli is governed by an impossibly rigid etiquette of do's and don'ts, and for her, as for all the other women; there is no life outside the haveli's high walls. The haveli has its own set rules for the women and it was a big haveli: “Sangram Singhji's haveli like so many others of the nobility was in a gully. Its first courtyard was built three hundred years ago and there were only three rooms around it. But like a banyan tree once it had taken root it spread. Today the haveli has so many courtyards with so many rooms” (Mehta 5-6).

The haveli represents the silence of women in the Rajasthan where this haveli is a symbol of this oppression. The haveli has no violence on the ladies. Though there may be other havelis which are depicted bigger than this haveli. For some times Geeta keeps an eye on the activities of the haveli and she fails to adjust in that suffocating environment of the haveli. It was very difficult for her to pass the boring daily routine of the haveli. She never saw a male of her family during the day time. It was a different world—a world of women. She is now anxious to know to what men do and how they live in the haveli. It seems her duty in the novel is to create peace on a domestic space as was the wife's domain and if she was to be considered to be a good wife—and thus retain her husband's prestige—she was expected to give an excellent performance as a housewife.

Being active in her home and passive in her relationship to her husband was the part of her role as a wife. Such a role is in agreement with Loomba's assessment of the family situation in colonial times. She explains the situation by claiming that “the strengthening of patriarchy within the family became one-way for colonized men to assert their otherwise eroded power” (Loomba 184).

One day when all the servants were not there, she thinks to cross the boundary line made for women: “A little shiver went through her body as Geeta thought of the day when she had trespassed into the men's apartments” (Mehta 19). The maid, Pari comes there and scolds her severely and calls her an outsider in the haveli: “What are you doing here all alone, Binniji. I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways...What would your father-in-law think when he saw you with your face uncovered? Binniji, daughters-in-law don't of this haveli don't behave like this” (Mehta 20).

Social structure and system postulate an inside/outside dichotomy on gender basis. In *Inside the Haveli*, this ‘Inside’ is assigned only to women, as women have no space in ‘Outside’ society. As V. Geetha notes: “The inside/outside dyad separates women and men, assigning women to the inside of homes, cultures – and men to the outer world, of labor, production and rule... and the outside is often a form for the exercise of local patriarchal authority... the home and hearth are conceptualized in folk, popular and much of literary. Culture – as an essentially ‘feminine’ space, whereas the outer world of commerce, rule and war is seen as a ‘man's world’. Words in most Indian languages designate the woman as the queen of the household, as its guardian angel,

its custodian and so on; where as a man is described as the one that brings in an income, as a protector and guardian of the hearth in his capacity as a public figure and as one who fashions the world, makes history” (Geetha 144 – 145).

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).

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. Geeta’s mother lived in the city of Mumbai and even she had not thought that her daughter would have to observe purdah in the family which is so affluent and the groom is a science professor. That’s why Geeta’s mother also tells everything else for her daughter’s successful married life except purdah as she does not consider worth mentioning as she has not to observe purdah in the city of Mumbai: “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” (Mehta 16).

According to Jung, the veil and Purdah are regarded as features of ‘psychic empowerment’ (19 Jung). Jasbir Jain in her article *Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah* states: “The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination in built in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology” (Jain 243).

Purdah in India exists both in Hindu as well as in Muslim society and is both a manifestation and a symbol of power relations. The Muslims brought with them the institution of Purdah which segregated women not only from any activity outside their houses but even from their close male relatives. With the passage of time, many of the Hindu families adopted this custom and gradually it spread all over India and women started covering their head and partly the face.

Geeta finds the environment of haveli congenial for men as all of their wished were fulfilled easily, "In the haveli the 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" (Mehta 21).

Geeta's mother was different from the other women. She had a dominating role in the family and kept all the servants up and going from morning till night. Men were free from all domestic worries. Another adjustment problem with Geeta is that she, being an educated girl thinks herself different from the other dominant members in the house. Had she spent a life like an uneducated domestic wife, everything would have been in her favour, but now she fails to adjust herself in that environment. When Geeta came to the haveli everybody is ready to find fault with her. She finds none in the home she can trust. Only her husband helps her but he is with her but only at night. Her husband, Ajay understands her feelings and tries to enter for a short while on any pretence in the women cell during day also.

Ajay realizes her need and occasionally comes upstairs on some excuse or the other. Once Ajay wants to take Geeta out for a drive, but she says, "No, I am not going out alone with you; the whole of Udaipur will be talking the minute we are out of gate" (166). Thus, neither she can enjoy freedom with her husband nor can she fondle and kiss her own child in the presence of her parents-in-law. The presence of authority feels everywhere. Nothing is done without consulting Geeta's grand father-in-law and father-in-law. It is around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved. "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).

Gender discrimination is found throughout the novel. In the social structure, how the meaning of gender is constructed and reconstructed both biologically and ideologically. Gender expresses the universal inequality between women and men. Virtually, every society known to us is founded upon assumptions of gender difference and the policies of gender inequality.

Geeta makes a companion Dhapu, a maid in the haveli who could help her to spend time at ease. In the absence of her Geeta feels restlessness in the haveli, "Without Dhapu, Geeta would have insisted on going back to her parents" (Mehta 22). Pari was an old servant in the haveli. She came there when she was a child and she has been servicing there for forty five years. She tells her story of pain to Geeta: "I was a child when I came to the haveli and your great grandmother-in-law trained me. She was strict. She kept me busy the whole day. Then once I became a widow. She would not let me put on colours saris or bangles like the other girls" (Mehta 23).

She was a very prudent lady and her quote can better describe the theme of this novel, "To be young is dangerous" (Mehta 23). Geeta faces the adjustment problem after years and maids always think, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (Mehta 29). Rama Mehta describes the women's world where they are considered to give birth to their many children. They bless

Geeta in such a way, “May you have many sons, my child, and may you always wears red” (Mehta 33). Geeta confronts many problems of the family and she is always ready to cope with the problems alone knowing that men are enjoying their lives. She says, “I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur; you are all pampered. You need your lives and think women are mere chattels” (Mehta 53).

At the beginning course of her journey to find a female identity, Geeta remains silent and passive. Along with physical veiling, emotions must also be hidden, Geeta finds that although the other women thrive on gossip, they never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feeling.

Moreover, she gradually comes to realize that, in spite of their exacting demands of conformity with the family tradition, her parents-in-law are essentially warmhearted and generous. Slowly and painfully, therefore, and almost in spite of herself, Geeta finds herself adjusting with the life in the haveli and with the thought of merging her identity of her children in the tradition of her husband’s ancient family.

But in the process she succeeds in initiating some reforms for the women of these ancient havelis by starting literacy classes for them and by sending the female children to school. Her women relatives, of course, oppose her plans, but her father-in-law, realising that with the end of the princely era, the old pattern of life could not possibly continue for long, supports Geeta’s attempt to make the women less dependent on the havelis.

Thus, *Inside the Haveli* is a fascinating novel in which the author has succeeded in conveying the essence and feel of a world which is fast disappearing. As Geraldine asserts that, “The scene on the global platform is much changed now. Women are now being allowed to take part in education. Unlike the education of men, however, it was never intended to give females full academic education. The aim was to enable them to fulfill their traditional roles better, not to change those roles” (Forbes 54). These women are not only double marginalized by the colonizers and by Indian men but also by the other societal rules prevalent in that time.

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