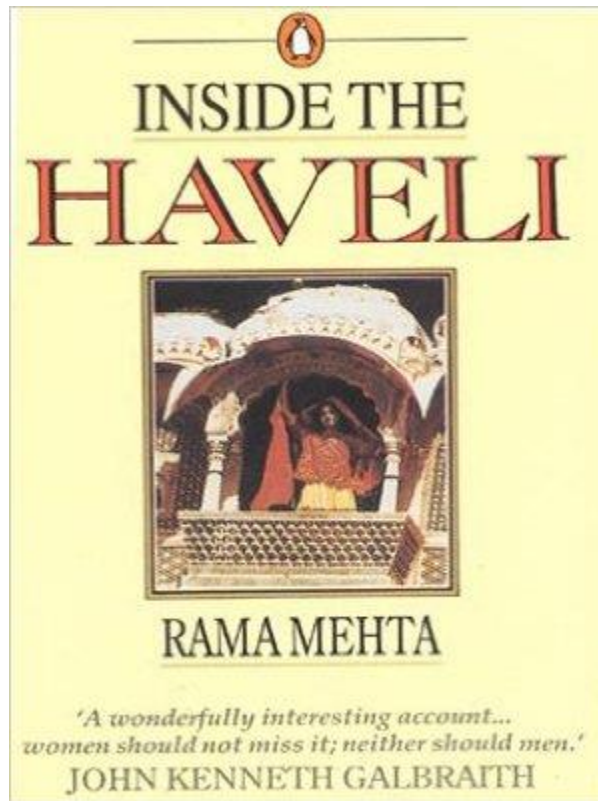


Cultural Identity amidst Modernity in Rama Mehta's
Inside the Haveli

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Abstract

Our culture, our tradition and our language are the foundations upon which we build our identity. The paper concentrates on the study of “Cultural Identity amidst Modernity in Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*”. Rama Mehta’s Sahitya Academy award winning novel *Inside the Haveli* is a hall mark piece of the saying that literature is a mirror of the society and that the artists are the shaping spirits. The novel produces a pen picture of the *haveli* in Rajasthan. It also serves as a seminal proof for the life style of the womenfolk. The novelist, herself, being

Rajasthani woman, stands witness to the lives and experience of the characters in the novel. The main objective is to throw light on the inner struggle of the optimistic life style of the major characters. The discussions contribute to the enlightening of the didactic elements in the novel. The persuasive style of the novel puts forth love as the basic force and common cause to construct a world community of compromise.

Key words:

Culture, Tradition, Modern, *Haveli*, *Purdah*

Indian Women and Modernity

The Indian woman experiences a perpetual conflict between a traditional mode of life and the modern outlook. Traditionally she is safely ensconced within her home, engaged in managing household and family matters throughout her life. Modernity promises her individualism, mobility and permissiveness. Contemporary fiction in English by Indian writers often explores the contention and consequences between tradition and modernity in India on the lives of women. Rama Mehta, New Indian woman writer, has explored the nuances of this issue in her fiction. She has presented the impact of modernization, the feminine psyche and behavior, and its repression in the traditional set-up of Indian society. Caught between the deadening influence of orthodoxy and the liberation forces of modernity, her woman protagonist provides a challenging study.

Inside the Haveli

The novel can be called the artistic manifestation of the author's own life experiences as a bride of a feudalistic aristocratic *haveli* in Udaipur and her own inherent cosmopolitan outlook and education. Rama Mehta tries to affect a sociable compromise between the forces of tradition and modernity. Her protagonist Geeta, the Rajasthani girl negotiates successfully with the patriarchal forces and becomes a harbinger of change. Like Geeta, a number of young educated women get relocated after their marriage in an entirely different and contrasting atmosphere. They feel lost and alienated. Mostly they crumble under the pressures and expectations of their new roles and demands. Sometimes they succeed in retaining their poise and carve out their own space through sensible efforts and negotiations. Geeta's life and her decisions in her marital

home provide a valid justification for women's education. It goes on to prove that even a single educated and sensible woman can be the cause of social change.

Inside the Haveli is mainly concerned with the smooth transition of its Bombay-bred heroine to her life in an Udaipur *Haveli*. In this novel, Rama Mehta has restricted herself to the depiction of life in an aristocratic family of Udaipur.

K. Radha comments:

The title of the novel *Inside the Haveli* is not just descriptive. It is a search or an exploration of one's own self: one's identify which is lost in the labyrinthine tradition and customs of society. The book has its own motion; a soft stir of values, perceptions and attitudes. It covers a period of fifteen years in the life of two characters - Geeta, the heroine and the other character being the *Haveli*, a silent witness to an entire era. (Dhawan 202)

Geeta, Modern Educated Woman

Geeta is a representative of the modern educated woman. She is torn apart by the other dominant character of the novel *Inside the Haveli* - Jeewan Niwas the *Haveli* itself. The *Haveli* is the setting of the novel. All the characters closely identify with the symbol chosen. It is the pivot round which revolves their aspirations, desires, hopes and fears. It gives direction to the thoughts and sensibilities of the characters. It is the symbol of the oppression and tyranny of age old customs. Geeta is haunted by the ghost of the *Haveli*. It becomes an open combat between the traditional and the modern. She fights hard to be free of this demon. She rebels against the set pattern of living framed by the *Haveli*. But the battle proves to be futile. In spite of all efforts, Geeta has to accept the traditional aspects as part of a heritage. This is reflective of the attitude of the Indian woman; she has to compromise on her individuality and self-assertion.

As it happens with majority of Indian girls, Geeta is married to a boy of her parents' choice at the young age of nineteen. She has lived and been educated in Bombay in a co-ed College. She is completely modern and emancipated. Though Ajay, Geeta's husband, is a professor in a college at Udaipur, he belongs to a highly conservative, tradition-bound and old-fashioned family. Geeta accompanies her husband to his aristocratic *Haveli* in Udaipur.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:7 July 2016

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Geeta is lively and spontaneous and confident of life ahead, when she was in Bombay. Her parents have always encouraged her to speak her mind. But two years of marriage has meant a change in her way of life. She has been taught reticence. She feels like a log of wood weighed down by the heavy brocade clothes and the golden jewelry she has to wear. The veil (head covering) which shuts off the world stifles and suffocates her. Her mind is full of misgivings, doubts, and fears. She is afraid of her own awkwardness.

Haveli is a Cage

Geeta realizes that the *Haveli* is a cage which has imprisoned her youthfulness. She longs to be free from its vicious grip. The strict etiquette of the *Haveli* is difficult to follow. Its formality is stifling. “No one expressed their feelings here. They covered their emotions. Everyone moved cautiously, every word was weighed before it was spoken”. (33) Geeta hates the fuss and pretence of the *Haveli*. It is also a symbol of greed and hypocrisy. “Women in the *Haveli* were like dressed- up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show ...Men were treated as Gods”. (33) The whole world of the *Haveli* revolves round the men. It cuts off the women from the main stream life of Udaipur. Living in the *Haveli*, Geeta feels cut off from the world of freedom. She yearns to know what is happening in the outside world.

Geeta finds herself in a milieu which is the very antithesis of the life at Bombay. The novel deals with slow stages of her transformation. She begins as a rebel and finally comes to terms with the norms of *Haveli*. She has to accept its way of life. In this slow process of adjustment, she is helped partly by her own common sense and tact, and the consideration of the members of the *Haveli*, especially her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law proves herself to be very kind, considerate and understanding.

The Haveli of SangramSinghji also has the *mardana* and *zenana* quarters, the former for ladies and the latter for gentlemen. Rama Mehta writes:

The separation of a self-contained unit was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept *Purdah*. Their activities were conducted within their apartments.

The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette

established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. (35)

Resistance to Purdah

Geeta's initial resistance to the *Purdah* (veil) gradually wears away. The attitude of her mother-in-law, Kanwarni Sa is very helpful. Geeta soon realizes that Kanwarni Sa is a force that has to be reckoned with. She always advises Geeta without abusing her. She manages the huge *Haveli* and controls the larger number of servants very efficiently. Her self confidence is great and she exudes "strength and dignity as if she were naturally born to command". (26) Her advice and admonition gradually reconcile Geeta to the *Purdah* and other practices and conventions of the *Haveli*. "Geeta even starts loving the veil because it hides her face and this allows her to think while others talk". (19)

All-Embracing Segregation of Men and Women

The *Purdah* is only one manifestation of the all-embracing segregation of men and women rigorously practiced in the *Haveli*. To Geeta, the way the members of the two sexes are kept apart in the *Haveli* is very irksome. Even two years after arrival in Udaipur, her father-in-law and grandfather are complete strangers to her. Husband and wife cannot show their intimacy by using the intimate space. Even her husband disappears at the break of the day and she sees him only at night. When Geeta learns that Ajay is not leaving Udaipur to join the Delhi University, she is saddened by the fact that she will not be able to go away from the *Haveli*. By way of consoling her, he gently draws her close to him. She is very upset by the thought of Vijay's early marriage. Here he just pats her on her shoulder. These are the classical behavior of intimacy delineated by the novelist.

Women are not allowed to enter the apartments of men and it is an act of extravagant courage for Geeta to trespass into the men's apartments. But she is caught by Pari, the old maid, and severely reprimanded. Even after several years, she could not reconcile herself to the gross injustice shown to the women in the *Haveli* in the matter of accommodation. "She contrasts the luxuriously furnished men's sitting room with her own room on the ground floor where she feels

trapped and suffocated”. (81) She decides that her spirit will not be crushed by the *Haveli*. As years pass, she prepares herself gradually to reconcile with it.

The Tyranny of the Customs and Superstitions

The tyranny of the customs and superstitions of the *Haveli* is quite evident on the occasion of the celebration of the twenty first day after the birth of Vijay, Geeta’s first child. During the ceremony, Geeta is asked to keep her face covered. She is also warned against talking too much. Her mother-in-law however placates Geeta by saying: “I want to show them (the guests) that even an educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my own son. Besides, I am getting old now and soon you will have to take over”. (26) As though words are not enough, she carefully fastens a bracelet on Geeta’s wrist. She also offers to send her food upstairs to enable her to eat in peace: “It was due to her (mother-in-law) fact and her gentle persuasion that Geeta had been gradually drawn into the life of the *Haveli* without even wanting to resist it”. (27)

Mother-in-law

The relationship between Geeta’s mother-in-law and the mother-in-law’s mother-in-law leaves a deep impression on Geeta’s mind. Bhagwat Singhji’s wife has put up with the hard discipline of her mother-in-law, Bhabha Sa for fifty years. She has heard her mother-in-law taunt her, scold her, find fault with her. But she has remained devoted to her and shared the joys and sorrows of the family with her for all fifty years. Bhagwat Singh’s wife feels greatly hurt at the death of her mother-in-law. Between sobs she says, “She has left me alone. For fifty years she guided me. To whom shall I turn now that she is no more? I am lost without her; the *Haveli* has lost its light”. (48) The old woman before her death acknowledges that Kanwarni Sa has been a good daughter-in-law to her. This evokes greater admiration in Geeta for her mother-in-law.

Bhagwat Singhji’s wife fondly addresses Geeta as ‘Binniji’. During Vijay’s birthday celebrations, she expresses her concern for Geeta: “Binniji, I know you don’t eat properly when there is confusion around you. As soon as the women sit down to eat, you come upstairs. I will have your *thali* sent up”. (26) Geeta feels that she has been trapped for life in the prison of the

Haveli. Once the chance offers itself for her escape. Her husband gets a tempting offer from the University of Delhi. She hopes to get back into a wider world. But once again the tyranny of the *Haveli* conventions and precedents crashes all her hopes. Ajay's mother with her usual self-restraint and tact tells Geeta, "I know him, he would rather sacrifice his happiness than cause us a moment's pain (by leaving Udaipur). The men in the *Haveli* are like that. Your father-in-law refused the Prime Ministership of Bikaner because he knew I would not be happy living outside Udaipur". (140)

Kanwarni Sa adds with her customary cleverness, leaving Geeta no choice in the matter:

I want to tell you that Bapu (her son) should not think of us this time. We are old and our work in the world is over. But you both are young and the future is open to you. Bapu should not let an opportunity like this pass. I am a mother. I want to see my children happy and fulfilled. You alone can make him see this. You must not let him give up something that will bring him respect and satisfaction. There are times when you must not think of the *Haveli*. (140)

Geetas's Limited Victories

With this speech, her dream melts into thin air like the baseless fabric of a vision. It makes Geeta break into tears, and putting her head into her mother-in-law's lap, she sobs like a child. Once again, Geeta gives up her stand and falls in line with the *Haveli* tradition. Geeta's adjustment to her life is not always by surrender to the ways of the *Haveli*. She has her victories too. She thinks of sending Sita, the daughter of the maid who has run away from the *Haveli*, to school. This is a revolutionary idea and meets with universal opposition from the *Haveli*. But Geeta stands firm. When the girl starts going to school, even those who have disapproved of the innovation in the beginning slowly start extolling her. Kanwarni Sa herself is all praise for her daughter-in-law: "I should be grateful; an educated girl like her could so easily have been a total misfit here. What could we have done, Pari, if she were insolent or worse, indifferent? No she has never raised her voice to me, and in her own way she is proud of the *Haveli*". (118)

Geeta thus proves that education does not necessarily spoil a girl and the old lady approves of Sita being sent to school. This decision is proved right later. The young man who has been thought of as Sita's husband insists on having an educated girl as his bride. Kanwarni Sa is grateful to Geeta for having sent the girl to school. Geeta has proved the words of Mahatma Gandhiji: "After your education is finished, you will not disappear in the household work, but you will extend your helping hand to the poor and needy" (Agarwal 88). Geeta undertakes teaching small children as well as grown up women in her room. Kanwarni Sa is not happy over this innovation. She is afraid that it will bring a bad name to the *Haveli*. She tolerates the classes, "because they gave Geeta a great deal of joy". (131) She however hopes that the experiment would be short lived. Indeed, the classes grow in popularity. But the opposition too continues. She meets the challenge of Nandu and Kanta who are Geeta's aunts-in-law "with aristocratic restraint". (136)

Geeta is overwhelmed with gratitude and admires her mother-in-law. She is also filled with remorse at having caused so much pain to her. Geeta is so grieved that she takes all the blame on herself and offers to ask the girls to come to her to study. But "the generous lady would hear no such thing and insists that the classes continue as before. Geeta bursts into tears, and putting her head in her mother-in-law's lap, sobs like a child". (140)

Renunciation

The novel opens with rains, thunder and midnight darkness appropriately foreshadowing Geeta's ignorant struggle. It ends with the rising sun symbolic of life and Geeta's enlightenment. In fine, the key concept here seems to be that of renunciation. In the words of K.R. Srinivasalyengar, "In the end, she becomes the mistress of the *Haveli*, feeling a pride in what is best in the family tradition and trying in other respects to make the *Haveli* community of relations and dependents move with the times, making sure of each forward step" (Dhawan 213). Geeta has a firm belief in the solidarity of the family which serves as an anchor. To borrow a phrase from T.S. Eliot, she works out her salvation with diligence. She understands the blissful truth about herself that she is not a mere chattel but the veritable chief of Jeevan Niwas. *Haveli* cannot be a prison to one who has realized the truth that true fulfillment lies in living for others, like the senior master of Jeevan Niwas who, like a huge banyan tree, sacrificed his life so that the

Haveli may get nourishment. Modernization cannot harm it in anyway. She does not simply submit to the native traditions, nor does she stand passively at the cross roads of traditions and modernity. Her problems are solved by a slow process of adjustment aided by the collective sympathy nurtured by every character in *Inside the Haveli*.

The Hindu religious symbolism of the tiny flame in the earthenware lamp is deeply evocative. The womanly passing of family traditions is seen as a sacred trust. The passage foregrounds the continuity of the ritual in literal and symbolic terms rather than the individual women who perform the rituals. Two things lead Geeta to accept Vir Singh's proposal for her daughter Vijay. Geeta realizes that all mothers start looking for suitable matches for their daughters early enough. Secondly, her father-in-law's words assuring her of the suitability of the proposal and that Vijay would not be married before the completion of her education changes her mind. However, she does not favour the proposal unless all the conditions are met with. Geeta is both conformist and non-conformist. She conforms to the modern values of education and marriage. She makes herself fit into the unbroken chain of the cultural heritage. Rama Mehta's success lies in harmonizing the two divergent trends.

Amalgamation of Tradition and Modernity

The novel delineates two different antithetical concepts of tradition and modernity and amalgamates them into heterogeneous ideologies. Geeta's objective is sociologically significant in rebuilding Indian society and family life by marrying these two concepts. The *Haveli* represents tradition, narrowness, and servitude of women and shackles of freedom. Geeta emerges out as a representative of modernism, rationalism, new outlook and emancipation of woman. A good sense of love stands as the force of the undercurrent in all her decisions.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:7 July 2016

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:7 July 2016

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