

PATRIARCHY GENDER AND POWER: INSIDE THE HAVELI
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Rama Metha's Inside the Haveli, a representative novel about Rajasthan, gives an insight into the culture and history of Rajasthan and opens up several issues related to gender and literary aesthetics. Though not an avowed feminist, Rama Mehta occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists. They concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her protagonist is modern, educated, sprightly, open-minded young girl from Bombay. She is crushed under the weight of male-dominated and tradition bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of the sufferings, disappointments and frustrations of her protagonist makes the novel more susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle. The novel focuses on the women's world in the Jenana in the middle of the twentieth century. She gives a vivid description of an ancient haveli - Jeewan Niwas, the haveli of Sangram Singhji that enjoyed once a resplendent status and glory under the patronage of the Maharana but now with no patron to support it and despite the change that time has caused to it, the firm observation of its age-old customs and traditions has not been affected to the least.

Keywords: haveli, women, male dominated, feminist, Rajasthan

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In order to critique the haveli culture Rama Metha introduces an 'outsider' as the protagonist of the novel. Geeta is born and raised in a cosmopolitan city and has received liberal education. When she is inducted at nineteen, a newly-wed bride, into the haveli, she is treated as an alien. The senior maids of the haveli promptly assume the responsibility of teaching Geeta the haveli norms. Brusque at times, they reprimanded her if the pallu of her saree slips off her head: " in Udaipur we keep purdah . strange eyes must not see your beautiful face", snapped Pair, pulling back the saree over her face (17). Geeta noticed on

her arrival at the haveli that all the women young and old, had their faces covered, even when there were no men around. Only daughters of the family moved around with faces uncovered. Geeta had to sit with her head bent among the innumerable relatives.

The purdah culture did not allow any form of dissent. Geeta, a spontaneous vivacious girl is not prepared for the constricted and demarcated life of the haveli, after her marriage. There is bewilderment on Geeta's part and shock on the part of the haveli women, who look on her as an alien. She is irked by the segregation of men and women; she finds unacceptable her inability to speak to her father-in-law directly; she feels trapped in the predicament of the high – class woman. Strict restrictions are imposed upon one's movements and actions. The poor enjoyed more freedom in the feudal society. In the servants quarters there was no segregation of the sexes. They can go out on the streets, they can rebel against male dominance, provided they must be prepared for the repercussion. Inside the Haveli is a novel written by a woman, the central characters as well as the minor characters are all woman and it is told entirely from a woman's point of view. The title of the novel *Inside the Haveli* is about a search "an exploration of one's self", one's identity which is lost in the labyrinthine customs and traditions of a feudal, aristocratic society.

As Geeta adjusts to the ways of the haveli, she sometimes inwardly frets and fumes and often longs for freedom. She feels frustrated at the total lack of privacy and longs for a space of her own. There is a persistent quest for intellectual freedom and the right to make one's own choices. Feelings of estrangement and anger at her own confinement fill her being. Many times, she felt the crushing weight of the walls that shut off the outside world.

When Geeta encountered the woman of her age from other havelis, they reminded her of "little canaries in a cage who sang and twittered, but seemed to know no passion. They neither had the courage to break the rules of traditions, nor the faith or commitment to uphold tradition. It seemed to Geeta that they were all waiting for the day when they would be freed from their confinement". (69)

“women are treated as chattels”, complains Geeta to her husband. Even when the men folk are absent their presence is always felt. Serving them and treating them as Gods is considered the essential duty of every woman. She finds that “ 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 shadows and followed their instructions with meticulous care”(18). The supremacy of the males was unquestioned. Her mother – in – law managed the entire haveli to keep men free from household worries.

Patriarchal structure and purdah culture features strikingly and dominantly in the novel. When Geeta arrives in Udaipur, one of the women came forward, pulled her sari over her face and said terrifying Geeta, “where do you come from that you show your face to the world ? “ In the first few months after marriage it was her maids, Pari and Dhapu, who guided her and taught her the etiquette of purdah society. The maids were an integral part of the haveli. In her paper, “From Purdah to Modernity”, Rama Metha comments on their role: “The maid servants in the haveli were the backbone sustaining such an elaborate and complex pattern of life” (119). They helped preserve the values of the haveli, groomed the young brides, and acquainted them with the traditions and rituals. It was they who imposed a strict regimentation and ensured that there were no violations. Once, when Geeta wandered into the lavish forbidden apartments of the men’s section to appease her curiosity, she was reprimanded by the senior maid, Pari “ What are you doing here all alone, Binniji ? I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways. In this section of the haveli women came only when properly escorted - - - what would your father – in – law think if he saw your face uncovered? Binniji, daughters-in-law of this haveli do not behave like this” (20). Geeta finds social relationship very artificial, since everyone was very formal with each other. They did not express their feelings spontaneously; their emotions were camouflaged by an elaborate exchange of formal gestures and words. Geeta was surprised to see that Ajay, her husband addressed his parents as if they were some dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties. Every sentence was prefixed with expressions like, “hukkm”, and “anndata”. Everyone was very

cautious and every word was weighed before it was spoken. Even with servants no one lost their temper, but reprimanded them with polite, though cutting words. The rules of propriety and good manners were strictly followed. Geeta's mother-in-law often impressed upon Geeta the importance of reticence. All lives in the haveli revolved round the masters of the haveli, the power and presence as described by Roland Barthes, who raises a question about a family pictures:

Where then is the man in this family picture ? Nowhere and everywhere; like the sky, the horizon, and authority which at once determines and limits a condition - - - man is never inside, feminity is pure, free, powerful; but man is everywhere around; he presses on all sides, he makes everything exist - - - the feminine world of Elle, a world without men, but entirely constituted by the gaze of man, is very exactly that of a gynaceum. (101)

Lakshmi, one of the maids of the haveli and her daughter Sita provides a parallel subplot to the novel, which is finely woven in the texture of the novel. Laskhmi feels humiliated and pained by the false accusation of her husband, who is symbolic of overbearing patriarchy. She openly rebels and revolts against her husband's inhuman treatment and injustice. She makes her choice, and leaves her husband to live with pride, dignity and self-respect even in the most difficult circumstances of life.

Women in the haveli do not have social or intellectual freedom, though there are celebrations, gossip, songs and dances to express themselves as individuals. Education alone would change the lives of these women and give them freedom from mental and social slavery. They had to be equipped to find employment elsewhere . Thus she moves beyond simple resentment, channelising her energies towards women's empowerment Geeta asserts her individualism and selfhood by giving education to the children of the servants of Jeevan Niwas as well as other havelis. This educational venture of Geeta is aided and supported by inmates of the haveli though rebuked by rival aristocratic families quick to seize an opportunity to run down their peers . She conducts classes which become very popular. She lights the ray of hope by her insistence on sending Sita to school. She

provides the facility of learning sewing and embroidery to those women, who find it difficult to master the alphabet. She is deeply concerned at the pathetic dependence of the servants on the kindness of their masters. Her attempts to educate the women of the haveli was not only undertaken to awaken social consciousness but to empower them economically since she is well aware of the fact that haveli would not be able to support for too long this unprivileged lot in future times. She is distressed by their ignorance, illiteracy and superstitions.

Geeta represents the Indian women who is torn between a conflict, whether to use their intellect, creativity and education for the betterment of others, or to surrender themselves to the customs circumscribed by the family which enter after marriage. Geeta's total negation of herself and her roles in the haveli as a wife, daughter – in – law, mother, mistress all stifle her existence. The Writer Rama Metha makes Geeta negate herself thoroughly to uphold the traditions of the family. Concealing one's feelings, practiced reticence, silence, acquiescence and adjustment are all a part of this negation of self. Moments of depression, self-doubt, serious internal conflict and complete lack of confidence overwhelm Geeta and force her to battle for her own sanity.

The women of the haveli including the mistresses, the servants, the neighbours knit together in a social fabric who share a special bonding of a common tradition and upbringing as a class 'women'. The condition of the widows is deplorable. They are supposed to lead a life of seclusion, austerity and hardship. The widows portrayed in the novel are Manji and senior maid Pari. Manji has been forbidden from many pleasures of life since she has been a widow. She is debarred from wearing jewellery and coloured sarees like other women. Moreover, she was not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies. Pari, though received great admiration and respect from all cannot attend Sita's wedding in the same yard. After Bhagwat Singhji's death, the mistress of Jeevan Niwas, comes out of her room, her shrunken body draped in black, her hands bare, her neck empty, her feet naked without the anklets. Geets is dejected to see her mother-in-law in such a condition " Bhabhi, what have you done to yourself? I can't bear to see you in black --

--". Her mother – in – law answered "Binniji, the Goddess has taken away my happiness. He has left me bereft----- everything else has gone"(208). A woman's happiness is closely tied to the life of her husband. His death would mean an end to a woman's own existence.

Geeta's immediate reaction at the proposal for her daughter Vijay's marriage at the age of thirteen, leads her to make a scathing attack at her husband.

" I have put up with enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend anymore - ---- you are all a punch of hypocrite". The violence of her thoughts sent shaft of pain through her head: " I have ruined my life, the children are not going to ruin theirs"(164).

Geeta asserts her will which is accepted by other members of the family with love and understanding. The sociologist Rama Mehta takes over from the woman writer and the literary artist throughout the novel. Geeta's revolt and her rebellion is thwarted at every turn, as she compromises between tradition and modernity. Through her protagonist Geeta Rama Mehta gives the message to the so-called educated Indians that to renounce one's cultural roots does not stand for modernity. There is an appreciation and glorification of the feudal way of life and the servility of the servant lives. The inmates of the haveli, living in close proximity, despite the conventions of gender and class that strictly separate them, are encouraged to come into symbiotic relationship under the watchful surveillance of an invisible patriarchy. The haveli provides support, sustenance and sense of belonging to its inmates. Geeta tries to think of her roots –her traditions in the haveli and her modern thoughts. Ultimately she discovers that these family bonds are essential ingredient of one's being. When Nandu and Manji protested the classes of Geeta, her mother – in – law silenced them both. "Geeta felt overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration for her mother – in – law - - - -".(pg. 169-170) Even her servants gave her devotion and respect that she understood its value for the first time". There was none of desperation of being enclosed within windowless walls that she wanted to shatter (pg. 170) and she became aware of the fact, "where else in the world could children be enveloped in such affection?" (pg. 171) Though the glory of the haveli has faded and the upkeep became too expensive, a façade of grace

and comfort is maintained by the masters of the haveli. Geeta has become a willing captive of the customs and way of life symbolized by the haveli. Her willingness to stay in the haveli was because she saw for herself a positive role to play in ushering in an era of modernization.

“The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds. Where else in the world I will get this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house? (137)

Yet Geeta’s transformation is gradual. Right from the start there is a conflict between her mind and her heart. One part of her protest against the orthodox traditions of the haveli while the other part gets carried away by her emotional response to the solidity of family life, the close kinship patterns, and the nobility of her husband’s ancestors. Vrinda Nabae, in her analysis of *Inside the Haveli*, finds the complete metamorphosis in the responses of Geeta difficult to accept (Margins of Erasure 67)

But I feel it is a calculated strategy of the author for two reasons first , she is trying to show the assimilation of Geeta in the haveli culture as gradual and natural; second Rama Mehta is depicting a period of transition. Some of the old practices have become quite redundant but the new order has not taken its place. Change is imminent and it can only be brought in by an ‘insider’. Hence the author has taken pains to show a willing change in Geeta. The change has not been affected by coercion but by mutual adjustment and sympathetic understanding Geeta is won over. For her conformity she is rewarded by unstinted affection showered on her by her in-laws. The process of the ego-dissolution has begun.

The novel explores the inner self of Geeta who symbolizes the ‘New woman’. She tries to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potentiality that is - her classes Geeta plays the role of an ideal house wife and an ideal daughter –in- law. As a result of this she cannot express her emotions for her father-in- law. It is the paradoxical situation in which she is enmeshed. In her heart she has deep and profound respect for

Bhagwat Singh ji but while expressing it, she retraces. Geeta's problem of '*becoming*' expresses Rama Mehta's polemics against gender role imposed upon a woman in a patriarchal culture. The novel gains its feminist stance from Geeta's persistent exploration of herself as an individual.

The society itself in those years when Rama Mehta has written the book was passing through the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. In such a period it was difficult to give a voice to the sufferings of women and to present the injustices heaped on them.

The novel contains the material of feminist thoughts like myriad roles of woman as daughter - in - law, wife, mother, the mistress of the haveli - identity crisis and mental subjugation and so on. Geeta achieves security through reconciliation. The ethos of the novel is neither the defeat nor the victory but of harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas of modernity and tradition, as Anita Desai says that "The understanding she brought to it". She fights to maintain the modern values that she has always lived by. She also brings out a pleasing combination between conflicting selves of the characters in the novel. She is able to hold her own in a household full of tradition-bound, royal, dignified, noble and well-mannered members of her family in the haveli. She takes complete care to delineate her presence as one shows it with courage and conviction of rationale and accountability to be a mistress of the haveli. She emerges as an intelligent, attractive and wholly practical woman. She understands the relationship with all its consequences and confident as well that she is not stretching for moral obligations. It is suggested that a modern educated woman like Geeta should pursue some meaningful activity within the precincts of her household in order to find happiness and contentment as well as her rights, desires, struggles and victories all together. It is Geeta's voice about her thoughts and feelings that we hear in "Inside the Haveli". By the end of the novel Geeta become voice of tradition and an active heir of the haveli. Her protest and resentments, though not vocal and opens, succeed to claim for her a position where she can speak and assert herself. The real strength lies in '*becoming*' one with the whole, and not '*being*' alone.

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