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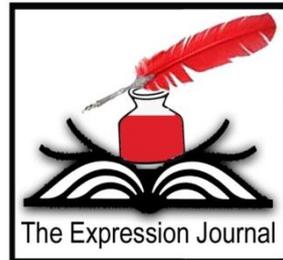
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WOMEN AND TRADITIONS IN RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI*: A CRITIQUE

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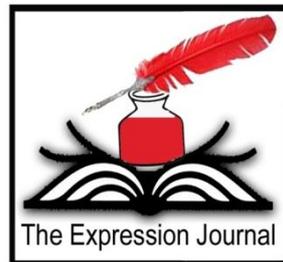
Abstract

Women's life is very difficult as they have to under many critical phases in their life and their problems become a nuisance to them when their affliction becomes the part of their life. They have to face the problem of gender discrimination since their birth. They are given less importance than a boy in their parental home and even after marriage; they have to go to their husband's house and have to follow the traditions and rituals of the new family. Many Indian women writers have written about the problems of the women through their novels, plays, stories and autobiographies so that men also understand their psychic turmoils. In this context, Rama Mehta, an acclaimed Sahitya Akademi winner novelist has also written her novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) about the women's world and their subjugated and marginalized status in a Rajputana family in Udaipur. Geeta, a girl who has seen the metropolitan life of Mumbai, feels trapped when she is married in the tradition-bound haveli where she is kept under all restrictions. The oppression of women has been depicted through the maid-servants who work in the haveli at the low wages and remained burdened with so many works. Many social evils like child marriage, purdah, conservatism, narrow-mindedness and the miserable life of the widows are the core themes of this novel and the main emphasis of this paper.

Keywords

Rama Mehta, *Inside The Haveli*, Tradition, Purdah, Feminism, Neurosis, Child-Marriage, Patriarchy.

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WOMEN AND TRADITIONS IN RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI*: A CRITIQUE DR SUNITA GOYAL

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When a woman writer gets big achievement in her life, she does keep her eye wide open towards the problems of the society. That is why it is said that literature is the reflection of society because writers notice whatever is happening in the society and scribble it through their works. Rama Mehta (1923-1978) is also one of those women writers who has brought out the problems of women through her works. She can be a great sociologist and novelist who got famous when she won the Sahitya Akademi Award (1979) for her novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977). Apart from it, her other works such as *Ramu: A Story of India* (1966) and *The Life of Keshav* (1969) and *The Hindu Divorced Woman* (1975), etc. also deal with one or the other problems of women. Women's education, patriarchal pressure, their marginalised status and their problems can be generally seen in her works. Shoma A. Chatterji also writes in this context that "men are dominating and women are dominated" (Chatterji 79). Thus, women are called inferior to men and it emerges as a dominant theme in this novel.

Geeta is the main female protagonist of the novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977). This novel presents the real pictures of the Rajputana culture as Iyengar also opines, "*Inside the Haveli* is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction" (Iyengar 753). The novel depicts a world where traditions are given priority than a woman's desires. Geeta is a modern girl who gets education in the free environment of Mumabi. Rama Mehta writes about Geeta upbringing, "Geeta had been differently brought up. She had gone to college and studied with boys. How could such a girl learn to live in such the constricted atmosphere of a world of women to give her elders the traditional deference?" (Mehta 16). The novel narrates how the marriage can transform a girl's life drastically. It has been depicted through the character of Geeta.

Geeta's marriage is fixed with a boy from Udaipur who belongs to a rich family from Udaipur. He was a science professor and Geeta's parents think that this status of the boy is sufficient for their daughter's marriage. They ignore other things and see his job and his family background, "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 15-16). When Geeta’s consent is asked as a formality for this marriage, she hesitatingly affirms her parents’ decision. A girl has to forget the rituals of her home and has to stick to the new environment and rituals of her husband’s family. There is a list of do’s and don’ts for her and the same happens with Gita also. Her mother suggests Geeta, “Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders, respect your mother-in-law and do as she tell[s] you. Don’t talk too much” (Mehta 16).

Geeta faces the reality of the women’s world when she goes to Udaipur through train and puts her first step on Udaipur Railway Station where she saw a group of women who had come to receive her. Geeta does not find her husband anywhere. She did not know that as a bride, she will have to observe purdah. Suddenly, an old maid-servant, Pari comes forward and she rebukes Geeta for it. Rama Mehta describes this scene in a picturesque manner, “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’” (Mehta 17). Though Geeta feels much embarrassed as she gets reprimand instead of a grand welcome as a newly-wed bride but she remains silent. She feels suffocation in the four-seater Fiat care when these women also sit in the car along with Geeta. Geeta becomes familiar with the tradition of purdah even before reaching to her husband’s house through these women who advise her, “No, no you cannot do that...in Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face” (Mehta 17).

Geeta finds a strange kind of environment in the haveli. When the novel opens, Geeta is married for two years and for the last two years, she has not seen the face of her father-in-law and grand father-in-law. She could hardly see her husband even during day time. Rama Mehta writes about it, “The men including her husband seemed to disappear as soon as it was daylight. The whole day they were away in their offices or busy in their section[s] of the house” (Mehta 19). However, her husband would think that Geeta is feeling alone that’s why he would go to the haveli during the day also at one or the other pretext.

Geeta feels very disappointed alone among other women. The walls of the haveli seem to suffocate her, “The room seemed to suffocate her. She felt trapped in the haveli, with its tradition and its unchanging patterns” (Mehta 100). One day, Geeta goes to men’s chamber out of curiosity. She was extremely frightened at that time, “A little shiver went through her body as Geeta thought of the day when she had trespassed into the men’s apartments.” (Mehta 19). But all of sudden, Pari comes and she gets angry at Geeta. She says:

“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)

Geeta’s husband had promised her at one time that he would take her to Delhi but later for his father’s sake, he drops this idea. Geeta feels very sad in the haveli but she has to compromise. She also understands the limitations of her husband also. Ajay also shows compassion towards Geeta but he is also helpless because being the member of the haveli, he also has to follow the traditions of the haveli like others. He comforts Geeta saying that “I know, it is difficult for you here, but Geeta; by being depressed you will not change this” (Mehta 52).

The novel deals with the issues of class consciousness and gender discrimination. In the second chapter of the novel, the birth of two girls has been narrated by the novelist. The first one is Geeta’s daughter, Vijay and second one is a maid-servant, Lakshmi’s daughter, Sita. Geeta’s delivery is conducted by a lady doctor just because she is the mistress of the haveli

while Lakshami's delivery is conducted by a midwife just because she was a mad. This is due to difference of their status. Moreover, Lakshami's husband was expecting a male-baby this time but when he comes to know about the birth of the girl child, he becomes sad and curses his fate. Another servant of the haveli Khyali comforts him saying, "Why worry? God takes care of all those He sends into the world. Girls are a burden, I admit, but what can be done once they are born?" (Mehta 7-8).

The difference of class is also mentioned when Geeta's daughter is sent to school and Sita is not sent to school. As both were born on the same day, that's why Vijay asks her mother out of curiosity why Sita is not being sent to school. Geeta also says to Pari, "Parijiji, Sita must go to school" (Mehta 98), but Pari says that the children of servants are not sent in schools. When Geeta feels that it is not justifiable act, she starts teaching servants' children and other women of the haveli herself. However, later she comes to know that these children and women were also not interested in the study, she also stops teaching them.

Geeta has to face many problems in the haveli. She faces the most difficult problem when a marriage proposal comes for her daughter when she was in her school. Daulat Singh's wife also favours this decision of marriage, "I know Binniji is not like us, she won't approve of early marriages, but Vir Singh is going to England for higher studies" (Mehta 203). Geeta becomes adamant and disapproves this marriage. She says to Bhagwant Singh's wife, "Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can't get engaged at this age" (Mehta 204).

Now Geeta feels that she has done a blunder by staying to this haveli. She thinks, "What a mistake I made to stay this home. I could have easily persuaded Ajay to leave. This had to come sooner or later. Now I am really trapped and cannot escape." (Mehta 205-206). Vir Singh belongs to a rich family but Geeta does not want to spoil the life of her daughter. She says to her husband:

"Well. Ajay, let me tell you that I don't care what family Vir Singh comes from or how much money he has buried in the ground. I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college, who knows what he will be like when he is a man?" (Mehta 206)

In the last, when she personally goes to Vir Singh's haveli, she finds everything favourable in this family and she gets agree for this marriage on the condition that Vijay's education will not be affected. In the last, she becomes the all-in-all of this haveli and starts loving those traditions also which she hated a lot in the beginning.

The life of the maid-servants was very miserable in the haveli. They have to work from morning till night and they were not allowed to take rest. Many servants of the haveli were those whose parents left them in their childhood due to their poverty. They thought that in this way, their children would not remain hungry. Pari was also one of those persons. She has been serving the haveli since last 45 years and her parents also left her in childhood. She becomes widow in a tender age. She was not allowed to remarry and remains as a widow. She narrates her story in the following words:

"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)

Even after her husband's death, she has to send money to her husband's family and follow the orders of her husband's family members. She has the whole responsibility of the haveli also being the oldest maid-servant of the haveli. She behaves very smartly and she says, "To be young is dangerous" (Mehta 23). She remains extremely busy at the time of Geeta's delivery

also that's why she says, "I have been on the feet for the last twelve hours" (Mehta 8). The life of other widows also have to wear white clothes and they had to live an ordinary life.

The life of the maid-servants and servants would become more complicated when children would fall ill. Rama Mehta writes about it, "The servants go hungry if the children haven't eaten; they would go without sleep if a child has a slight headache" (Mehta 137). Men have been depicted as the supreme beings and their every wish was fulfilled. Rama Mehta writes about it, "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).

As a conclusion, it can be stated that the novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) narrates the marginalised status of the women. They work like puppets for men and they have to carry out the orders of the patriarchs. The miserable life of the servants and maid-servants is also a recurring theme of this novel. This novel is a critique on many social evils prevalent at that time. Moreover, Geeta's struggle for equality and justice also remains one of the dominant themes but in the end, Geeta succeeds in her efforts by becoming the mistress of the haveli. Sumita Pal also postulates about the change in the novel, "The novel ends with Geeta's taking over" (Sumita Pal 101). Dr M. S. Vimal also writes about this novel:

This novel has been written about Rama Mehta's own life how being a woman; she has to face many problems. She has written about the problems of a woman through the character of Geeta. (Vimal 82)

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