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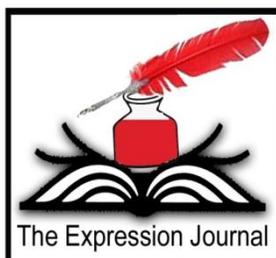
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**FEMINIST REVERBERATIONS IN RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI***

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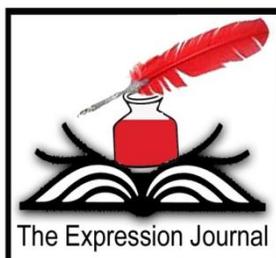
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**Abstract**

Patriarchal system, more or less, is prevalent in almost every part of the world and since eras ago, women are considered inferior and at marginalized positions. Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* is a pathetic tale of a girl name Geeta who is married in a tradition ridden family in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Basically, she belongs to Mumbai where she leads a modern life but after her marriage she is kept inside the haveli and she is strictly instructed to observe the traditional rules of the haveli. She is not allowed to meet her husband during whole day and she has to maintain *purdah* (veil) in the haveli. She determines to teach the women and children of the haveli and How she reacts in these suffocating circumstances and how she brings revolutionary changes there by her presence, has been extensively and meticulously analyzed in this paper.

**Key-Words**

Haveli, Purdah, Traditionalism, Child-marriage, Exploitation.  
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Wife and slave are the same  
But only differ in the name.

— (Chudleigh, To the Ladies, 273)

A very fine statement about chauvinistic stance or gender discrimination “To be young is dangerous” (23) by a maid servant, Pari in the novel *Inside the Haveli* by Rama Mehta, frisks at one of the recurring themes of this novel. Rama Mehta is a pioneer voice in English literature for the cause, upliftment and welfare of women. Women, in her novels, are nagged and harassed by patriarchal rules but their spirit is never damped in the adversities. Her novel *Inside the Haveli* is set in pink city Udaipur and it focuses on the corroded and rotten traditions like female-birth, child-marriage, girl-education, *pardah* system, widow-remarriage, suppression of women etc. The novel is an exquisite portrayal of unrelenting struggle by a bride against mangled domestic rules like *pardah* made by her husband’s family members who run this family on the rules laid on patriarchal hegemony. The people of Rajasthan have money but they fail to emerge out of the rules devised and contrived by the custom-ridden patriarchal society in which they live and this society is plagued by many so-called gender-based problems. The main thing to discuss and analyze is the narrow-mentality of the people, inside and even outside, of this haveli. Even the servants don’t like the birth of a girl-child and her birth is considered inauspicious by them.

Sita, a servant's daughter's birth in the haveli is the burning example of it. Nobody is happy with this birth, neither her father Gangaram, nor Khyali, other servant of the haveli or the mid-wife Sarju. They consider this girl a burden. Then Khyali says, "Girls are a burden, I admit but what one do once they are born." (Mehta 7) Gangaram is highly dissatisfied with his fate and he considers himself unlucky. He predicts that her mistress will give birth to a male baby as the rich get in their lives what they want, "Young mistress, of course, she will get a boy. The rich always get what they want; it is the poor who have all the bad luck" (Mehta 15). Not only men even women also have such kind of mentality. The old ladies also bless the brides with many male-children and there is no place for female-child in their blessings, "May you have many sons, my child, and may you always wear red." (Mehta 33)

Many problems of gender-based Rasputin society have been projected through the main character Geeta – a girl from Mumbai who is married in a traditional family in which *purdah* (veil) is must to observe. She is so innocent that she does not enquires about the boy, Ajay who comes to see her for marriage and she does not bother to think what short of environment he lives in. She just says 'yes' for marriage to her parents. Ajay belongs to a rich family and he is well-settled also, "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). Geeta's parents also are unaware of this fact whether this modern girl will be suitable for this conservative family or not. They only see the boy's background. As he is a Science Professor and they think that with this man, their daughter will be happy but they don't think that behind his education, there is his traditional family which has strict rules which can be followed only by traditional, uneducated girls and women. Both these families are unaware of the upcoming storm in Geeta's life. Everything is behind the curtain until they get married. But when they get married, her marital journey proves bumpy and even the very first day proves shocking to Geeta. She comes in a train as a bride and the maid-servants reach singing songs to receive Geeta as a bride. This was the last day of Geeta's life she has breathed in free air. While deboarding the train she does not observes *purdah* for which she is chided by one of the maids, Pari and she immediately pulls Geeta's sari on her face, "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) This is a new home for Geeta where her own individuality is destroyed. Anupama Chowdhury says, "Home reveals a disturbing home truth that joint families can both destroy and preserve our maturity, individuality and mental progress". (Chowdhury 33) Geeta feels much humiliated but she remains silent and sits in the four-seater Fiat car. But to her great surprise, all the maids also sit in the car and she feels suffocation but could not muster courage to lower the glass of the car. Geeta wants to see her uncle-in-law's haveli but she is again stopped for doing so "No, no you cannot do that...in Udaipur we keep *purdah*. Strange

eyes must not see your beautiful face.” (Mehta 17) She finds a different kind of environment there as for complete two years she could not see the faces of her father-in-law and grandfather-in-law. Thus, they remain absolutely strangers to her as there were separate apartments for them. Her husband was also hardly seen during the day:

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)

In this way Geeta spends two years and she feels strangulation and suffocation in this haveli but she does not cover before the circumstances. Geeta belonged to Mumbai and she had enjoyed a life of liberty, “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) There is a different world in the haveli during day time but there is not such restriction at night. There is a curiosity in Geeta’s mind about the world of men, how they live, what they do etc. She tries to get a chance to peep into their lives. One day, fortunately, she seizes an opportunity when none of the servants was there. She enters the male-chamber hesitatingly, “A little shiver went through her body as Geeta thought of the day when she had trespassed into the men’s apartments.” (Mehta 19) All of sudden, the maid-servant, Pari approaches there and she scolds Geeta and calls her an outsider, “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 is envious of the phallogocentric hegemony and it gives her pains how all the men in the haveli live in a liberated world and women are forced to live subordinate lives. Men are treated as if they were Gods and all of their demands are fulfilled at their biddings but women have no wishes, no desires, no dreams and in all, no life, “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-in-law is different from other women in the haveli. She is a dominates and monopolizes the haveli and all the servants work under her observation as all the sons-in-law and daughters work under Mrs. Tulsi in V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Geeta finds nobody in the haveli with whom she can share her views, problems and dilemmas. She finds her husband a little bit friendly but he has some limitations and he too observes the rules of the haveli. He sometimes goes upstairs for Geeta’s sake but she is not much satisfied with this short meeting during the day:

Ajay realizes her need and occasionally comes upstairs on some excuse or the other but these visits were short and hurried. Geeta was embarrassed by them. The maids laughed as if they understand why he came to the women's apartment. (Mehta 21)

In the haveli, everybody, even the maids find fault with Geeta and she is not considered like a mistress of the haveli. Her life in the haveli is not much better than maids, still she bears all undauntedly. Even maids have not much restriction on going to other places as she has in her life. Ultimately, she gets closer to a maid Dhapu in the haveli who gives her some solace, "Without Dhapu, Geeta would have Insisted on going back to her parents." (Mehta 22) Loomba holds colonialism responsible for the miseries of Geeta, "Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression..." (Loomba 141) Boehmer says that these women are more marginalized than that of other women, "Colonized women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized." (Boehmer 224)

Geeta finds the problem of adjustment for a long time and maids always think about her, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (Mehta 29) Geeta and other women especially servants in the haveli have to confront with many problems in the haveli. She thinks that there are no problems for men and they enjoy their lives and these are only women who are suffering and living a miserable life. She finds other girls and women also in the cage of patriarchy that's why she calls them "little canaries in cage." (Mehta 87) Geeta's room seems to suffocate her all the time and she finds very hard to escape from that environment and she thinks that she is trapped now, "The room seemed to suffocate her. She felt trapped in the haveli, with its tradition and its unchanging patterns." (Mehta 100) Shahji Gaikwad opines, "Educated and brought up in a free cosmopolitan air, Geeta feels suffocated in the haveli." (Gaikwad 166) Geeta occasionally goes outside and she feels jealous of the ladies outside roaming at their own will. She considers herself a stranger in her own home after years, "Even after seven years I am strangers to those that I are mine, and I will always remain stranger." (Mehta 105) Thus, *purdah* becomes a severe problem for her and when she tells this problem to her husband, he says, "I know, it is difficult for you here, but Geeta; by being depressed you will not change this." (Mehta 52) Gaikwad comments that Geeta finds a different world in her in-laws' haveli, "It is in Bombay her father is always ready to respond to the children's questions, no matter how busy he is." (Gaikwad 168) Women's place is only in the haveli and they are deprived of going to the outside world to the maximum possible extent. Women are not much better than the servants. They don't do household-chores like maids otherwise they follow the same rules as other maids do. Their rights are only inside the haveli and only in the dark night where they are with their husbands. As soon as the sun rises their husbands slip away for their routine work and the women crave even for their sight during daytime. If they are back in day, then there is a separate place for all men and they stay, negotiate or rest there but they don't go to the

female chambers as it is restricted in day following the orders of the elders of the haveli, "Like everyone else in the haveli there was a form that men maintained too" (Mehta 21). This is not the rule of this haveli; this is the rule of whole Udaipur. Women have one duty to serve and keep their husbands and other members of the family happy. The duty of a woman has been described in these words, "The only duty was to serve her husband's family." (Mehta 117)

Time passes and Geeta's daughter Vijay grows and she starts going to school. Geeta's daughter, Vijay and Lakshmi's daughter, Sita are of the same age. Due to childlike curiosity, one day Vijay questions her mother if she can be allowed going to school then why Sita cannot go to school. Her daughter's question troubles her so much that she plans to do something not only Sita but for the other girls of the haveli. Over a discussion, she says, "Parijiji, Sita must go to school". Then Pari replies reluctantly, "Binniji, Sita is a child of a servant. [S]He cannot go to school." (Mehta 98) Forbes writes that education of women is not good for Hindu women. There is a fear of their being widow due to their education, "A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow." (Forbes 33) Manji Bua Sa, a cousin of Bhagwat Singhji tells Geeta that servant's daughter's sending to school can disturb the life of haveli. She appreciates Geeta for motivating the servants' daughters to go to school, "I am glad you are bringing new ideas in the haveli" (Mehta 115). Ajay is happy that his wife is doing what he is could not do despite of his good education and position. He excites Geeta at times to take challenges saying that he will be always with her, "As long as I am with you, no one dare lift a finger against you." (Mehta 166) A revolutionary step taken by Geeta in the haveli is a campaign of teaching servants' children and other women. Even maids also join her classes, "News of the classes spread like monsoon floods and the young maids from the haveli came and joined the children. At first they just listened to the stories... (Mehta 160) When once Geeta started she did not stop. One day a boy, Ravi came into the haveli with servants' children. Geeta asks Ravi:

'Have you ever been in a city before?' Geeta asked the wide-eyed boy.

'No Hukkum. This is the first time,' replied Ravi.

'What did you do in the village?' asked Geeta. She was touched by the boy's sad vacant eyes.

'In the morning, I helped mother to collect cow-dung, milk the cows, and in the afternoon I took the cows out grazing.' (Mehta 159)

Geeta faces another problem when her daughter, Vijay's is proposed to marry from an

aristocratic family. Vijay is still a child and Geeta does not allow this to happen. She does not want that her daughter also become the victim of the rotten rules of the haveli. Vijay is at that time only thirteen years old, "Vijay Bai Sa is growing up, she must be turning thirteen now." (Mehta 203) All other ladies have no objection to this. They just approve this. Thus, women are also responsible of their own sorry plight. They have the mentality that women should learn to bear pain. 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. We only want to have his engagement ceremony before he lives, marriage can wait, and meanwhile Vijay Bai Sa can continue her education." (Mehta 203)

But Geeta is adamant to her decision and she says to Bhagwant Singh's wife, "Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can't get engaged at this age." (Mehta 204) She repents over her folly why she didn't persuade Ajay to leave this haveli and settle at Delhi. She feels trapped again and finds no way to escape:

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. But on this point I will never give in, whatever happens. If I have ruined my life, the children are not going to ruin theirs. (Mehta 205-206)

She complains this to Ajay and reproaches him. She is not in the position to bear with the strict rules of the haveli. But Ajay's words also could not mollify her temper. She made up her mind not to follow the rules of Haveli anymore:

I have put up with enough I'm your family and I am not prepared to bend anymore. I won't ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child. I know exactly how these things work in this place. First they will only want an engagement and no sooner has that been done, they will start talking about marriage. You are all a bunch of hypocrites. (Mehta 206)

Geeta obliterates all the patriarchal rules and she is never ready for what is being done for her daughter. She does not bend in that situation. It is her husband who stands by her in that situation, "As long as I am with you, no one dare lift a finger against you." (Mehta 208) Geeta has fears about her daughter's future:

Don't I know the smooth velvety language of this haveli? 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)

Geeta is not the only one who suffers in the haveli; there are other maid-servants and women who also live their lives in suffocation. Even their intrinsic requirements are not fulfilled. The servants and maids serve in the haveli since their childhood as their parents have nothing to feed them and they leave their children in the haveli so that they can get two scores meals. Pari is one of such maids whose story is also very pathetic. She comes in the haveli when she is only ten years old and after two years she gets married. She is so busy in her duties that she gets less time to rest. At the time of Vijay's birth she says, "I have been on the feet for the last twelve hours" (Mehta 8). Other maids also are very tired of the hectic schedule of the haveli; that's why they prefer to deliver baby every year in order to take rest and have recuperation. There is no provision of their post-natal check-ups. At the time of Geeta's delivery when doctor says to maintain silence, hygiene and cleanliness, Pari comments on it, "The doctors think having a baby is like having an operation. 'Be quiet, don't talk, wash this, boil that.' What a fuss for nothing. Sarju has delivered ten babies in the very room, but I have never seen this kind of fuss before." (Mehta 10) Pari gets widow at the early age and she develops a prestigious place in the haveli. 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 has seen many upheavals in the haveli. All the brides work under her guidance whenever they enter in the haveli. Thus, Pari has plumbed the rules of the haveli minutely and she has gained respect and a better place in the haveli though she has to strive a lot to get that position. She has to suffer much during these years. She tells her story of woes to Lakshmi, Sita's mother:

Look at me though I have been a widow almost all my life, I am still not free of my in-laws...I have never have a penny left after the demands of my in-laws. And what do I get from them? Nothing. Not even a blouse. But I don't complain. We all have to accept fate. This is no escape from that. (Mehta 12)

When Lakshmi gives birth to Sita she is little over fifteen. She is also fed up with the tight working schedule of the haveli and she is willing to give birth every year so that she may get time to take rest. She says “I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and only for twenty one days.” (Mehta 12) Not only servant, Manji Bhua Sa also becomes widow at the age of fourteen and lives a life of widowhood since then, “The days and life are long in her widowed life. She lost her husband at the age of fourteen, since then she has been living in the haveli admitting that it is her fate.” (Mehta 134)

Servants and maids’ life is not so easy. Their duties are hard and especially when there is any problem in the haveli or there is anybody disposed especially the children, “The servants go hungry if the children haven’t eaten; they would go without sleep if a child has a slight headache.” (Mehta 137) Other women and girls also are fed up with their present situation and they want to get out of this stifling environment, “...they are waiting to be freed from the confinement.” (Mehta 167) Iyengar calls *Inside the Haveli* is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction. (Iyengar 753)

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. (Forbes 54)

Geeta calls this as her fate. She says, “I don’t want to leave. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds”. (Mehta 137) But in the end the things happen as Geeta wants. Sumita Pal says about the change in the novel, “The novel ends with Geeta’s taking over (Sumita Pal 101). The story of this Mumbai girl has resemblances with a Kolkata girl Dimple Das Gupta in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* in which Dimple’s dreams of married life are badly shattered when she finds an incompatible match with less sources than she has expected, “She wanted a different life—an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris—so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects.” (Mukherjee 3) Her husband Amit Kumar Basu is a young engineer from a middle class family and he could not give her as she has expected “provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A. M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine ‘kababs’ rolled in ‘roti’”. (Mukherjee 101-2) He has limited wealth and he fails to provide her all materialistic pursuits “Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts.” (Mukherjee 113)

Geeta’s problem is not the problem of only one woman; many women in India are piqued by this social problem. It is the country which has a very rich past and women are

respected here since ancient time. But these days, women's respect lies in constitution, meetings, conferences, books, Indian scriptures etc. but the real picture of women is still not good and they are living their lives under the shadow of manhood. In Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine*; Venu, the aspiring male poet, advises Mira, "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men." (Deshpande 127) This shows that men want to dominate on all fields. In the novel *A River Sutra* the words of music teacher beautifully depict a bride the greatest gift to groom from her parents, "The greatest gift a man can give is the gift of a daughter in marriage." (Mehta 214) Mahesh Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September* describes another problem of child-abuse where both mother and daughters are victimized by the same person who is a closer relative to both of them. Shanta's brother sexually exploits her when she is only six years old. She tells her story to her daughter Mala who is also molested by her maternal uncle, "Shanta: I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen....and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!" (Dattani 154) Not only this he does not spare her daughter Mala also whenever he comes to her sister or they go to his home. Thus, there are many problems which Indian women have to face but they don't raise voice against this due to infamy.

Conclusively, it is insinuated that women have one or the other problem in patriarchal society and they are striving hard to come out of the stifling and suffocating environment but only a few of them resort agitation and resistance and to some extent enjoy liberty while other live life like silent-sufferers in inertia and shed tears and nobody comes forward to wipe out their tears. Thus, they live a sub-human life in rigid and wobbly circumstances.

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