

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*: Geeta's Journey from Bondage to Liberation

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Since ancient time, women have been placed at the secondary role by the patriarchs in our society. They are given less important as compared to men. Our society always keeps women under their pressure because they have to do all the household chores, take care of the cattle, children and the other members of the family. Even the responsibility of the kitchen is given to them. In the modern context, women are doing jobs also but they have to do all the kitchen work of their homes apart from other duties. Men are generally given only one responsibility i.e. to earn bread for the family. Apart from that they usually play no significant role in the family.

Many writers have written about the women's pitiable plight, their exploitation and subjugated status. In this context, Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* is a strong document in which women play less important roles in the man-dominated society. This novel narrates the story of a newly-married girl Geeta on whom many restrictions are imposed by her in-laws' family. This novel portrays the real-life situations of women as Iyengar also writes, "*Inside the Haveli* is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction" (Iyengar 753).

Inside the Haveli is about the tradition-rotten male-dominated society where women are kept under purdah. The novel has its setting in the Pink City Udaipur and novel narrates the rituals, manners and customs of the Rajasthani culture. It is about how women have to remain under constant pressure of male-hegemony. The novel also attacks on the gender discrimination, narrow-mindedness of people, child marriage, widow-remarriage denial and many more social evils. Bijender Singh writes about this novel:

Inside the Haveli is a novel that delineates a few bad customs like purdah-tradition, narrow-mindedness, women exploitation, girls' illiteracy and child marriage prevailed in a Rajputana haveli of Udaipur in Rajasthan, India that is symbolic of prevalence of all these bad customs, rituals and rules in all over India. (Singh 1)

The novel opens with the storm and an incident of the birth of the two girls. Sita is the daughter of a servant of the Haveli while another is the daughter of Geeta, the mistress, of the Haveli. Nobody has ever thought that a girl child will be born. The discussion of the servants about

the girl child depicts that girls are unwelcomed persons in the society. The cook Khyali tells girls a burden on them.

Rama Mehta has focused on the life of the servants also in this novel. There is a character named Pari who has the whole responsibility of the haveli. She is the senior most maid of the haveli. She has been working in the haveli since her childhood. When the parents have nothing to feed her children, haveli gives them food and shelter for their work.

Gender discrimination remains the main theme of the novel. So far is the delivery of the two women is concerned, Geeta's delivery is conducted by a doctor while the maid's delivery is done by the midwife just because her life and her baby's life are given less importance in the haveli.

It is very difficult for a woman to give birth to a child. Geeta was much concerned about the birth of her child. The doctor tells Pari to maintain cleanliness after the delivery. The doctor further advises her that proper hygiene must be maintained but Pari thinks that the lady doctor is becoming more formal in her duties. She says:

The doctors think having a baby is like having an operation...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)

There is also discrimination between women in the haveli. There are two types of women in the haveli. The first one are the powerful women of the haveli and the second one are the maid-servants. The maid servants have to do many works of the Haveli continuously without giving any rest. Pari says, "I have been on the feet for the last twelve hours" (Mehta 8). Sometimes they think that they may become pregnant and deliver a baby so that they may be able to have some rest. Moreover, it was their responsibility to take care of the children and if there is any problem to them, the duty of the servants becomes tough. Rama Mehta writes, "The servants go hungry if the children haven't eaten, they would go without sleep if a child has a slight headache (Mehta 137).

Servants' life is not so easy in the haveli. The servants and maids come in the haveli as child labourers just because their parents don't have sufficient money to give them food to eat that is why such children are forced to work as maids and servants. Their parents take such steps so that they may save them from starvation. Pari is also one of such servants. She was left in the haveli when she was nearly 10 years old. When she got married, she was nearly 12 years old. She becomes a widow in her youth. She has been working in the haveli since 45 years and it is the reason that she has a very respectable place in the haveli. She has seen four generations of this haveli. She is under the pressure

of her in-laws family even after the death of her husband, but she has accepted it as her destiny. Rama Mehta writes about it:

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)

Rama Mehta has shed light on the miserable life of the widows. They are kept apart from the other women in the haveli is also different and they remain dissatisfied in their life. Apart from Pari, Manji Bhua is also another character of this novel who is also a widow. After the death of her husband, her life becomes miserable. "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). The third widow of the novel is Kantha who also has the same fate. These widows could have remarried but it was not allowed for them.

So far is the main female protagonist of the novel Geeta is concerned, she is a well-educated girl from Mumbai. When the novel opens, two years have been passed she has been living in the haveli. She has come here after marrying. Her husband is a science professor but he also has to follow the norms of the haveli. He knows that his wife has lived in Mumbai and it will be very difficult for her to adjust in the haveli but he is helpless as he cannot do anything. Geeta has lived in a liberated environment before marriage. Geeta has been presented as an obedient girl in the novel. Her husband comes to see her and her parents find it a suitable match. Geeta obeys her parents' orders keeping in mind the feelings of her family members.

Geeta comes to Udaipur from Mumbai by train. She knows that her life is not going to be so simple for her in Udaipur. When she steps on the railway station, the maid servants come to receive her. She was not much aware about the rituals of Udaipur that is why she doesn't observe purdah. When she comes on the railway station, the maid servant Pari comes forward and she pulls Geeta's saree on her face. She comes to realise that she will face many challenges in her in-laws' haveli. Pari rebukes her in the haveli also and teaches her the rules of the haveli:

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-laws of this haveli don't behave like this. (Mehta 20)

Geeta is shocked to know the environment of the haveli. She had to obey the strict rules of the haveli. She notices that this haveli was the only world of the women during the whole day. Man

would go for work during the day and only women would remain in the haveli. She thinks, “The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds” (Mehta 137). She would miss her husband the whole day. Her husband Ajay would understand her problem and that’s why he would come in the haveli to meet her on one or the other pretext. He convinces her sometimes:

I know, it is difficult for you here, but Geeta; by being depressed you will not change this...This life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me try and see what you could do in this atmosphere. You must always have confidence in me that I will support you in whatever you decide to do. (Mehta 52-53)

Geeta was not allowed to go to the men’s chamber in the haveli. Geeta takes a bold step to go to that place of the haveli. She is rebuked for that. Geeta had never seen her father-in-law and grandfather-in-law in the haveli.

She was not feeling comfortable in the haveli though she had been living in it since last 7 years. She requests her husband to settle in Delhi but her husband does not listen to her and tells her to stay in the haveli for some more time.

Time passes by and Geeta’s daughter Vijay starts going to school. Geeta asks Pari one day why do the servants’ daughters not go to school. Pari tells her that the children of the servants are not allowed to go to school, “Binniji, Sita is a child of a servant. [S]He cannot go to school” (Mehta 98). She decides to teach the servants’ children and maids in the haveli and her husband also co-operates her in this work. It was the first victory of Geeta. Chotte Lal Khartri remarks, “In this enterprise Ajay always stands by her as a docile fellow” (Khartri 106).

Geeta takes another bold step of her life when there is a marriage proposal for her daughter Vijay when she was merely 13 years old. It was a good proposal because the boy Vir Singh belonged to a very rich family of Udaipur. He was studying in college at that time. Geeta was unhappy on this proposal and she decides that she will not allow to spoil the career of her daughter. She says, “My daughter’s marriage is my concern. I will never agree to Vijay’s engagement like this. Even if it were the son of Udaipur, I wouldn’t agree” (Mehta 171). She was strictly against such rules of the haveli she does not listen to anybody. She refuses for this marriage proposal because she did not want that her daughter also suffer throughout her life like her.

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)

Thus, Geeta remains victorious at the end of the novel. Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* has beautifully narrated many important themes related to women. Geeta is a representative of all married women and Pari represents the whole labour class. The novel is Geeta's journey from her marginalization to her independent status. Sumita Pal observes "The novel ends with Geeta's taking over (Pal 101). Geeta, in the last, remains much successful but she always feels entrapped as she always feels remorseful also. She feels:

What a mistake I made to stay here, 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 lose theirs (Mehta 164).

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