

Redefining Relationships in Rama Mehta's inside the Haveli

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Abstract: *The paper concentrates on the study of "Redefining Relationships in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli". The major incidents are taking into account to support the study. Although Rama Mehta hails from a modern urban breed, she has her own original sense of Indian adjustment to the tradition. She plays the role of a catalyst shedding new colours to tradition and modernity. She tries to cut out a different dimension to the role of the daughter-in-law of the traditional family. Unconditional love is her only weapon to bring out congenial changes. She owes her success to the amiable attitudes of her mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband. Her consistent attempt causes a harmonious blending of heterogeneous ideologies. She has no hesitation to fit into the strong bonds of traditional Haveli.*

I. Introduction

Language has always had a place in human affairs. English is universally acclaimed to have distilled essence of modern knowledge in all fields of human activity. The credit goes to its adaptive nature. An increasing use of English for creative expressions by the Indian novelists has given rise to a perennially prestigious place in the annals of Indian writing in English. It is used in India towards maintaining appropriate Indian patterns of life, culture and education. The evolution of a distinct thought, imagery and idiom have augmented the Indianness of English. Indian writing in English is certainly different form that of the Britains or Americans but it conforms to the correct usage of Standard English.

Contemporary women's fiction is a vivid illustration of the hurdles to break through tradition. The picture that emerges underlines women are even more confined by the social norms. This picture shows a woman firmly rooted in her familiar space and domestic status. Central to current women's writing is the concern to produce a woman who demands self-assertion. The female figure is allowed to display her self-will and energy.

Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* is a hallmark piece of the saying that literature is a mirror of the society and that the artists are the shaping spirits of the same. The novel produces not only a pen picture of the Haveli in Rajasthan but also serves as a seminal proof for the life style of the womenfolk. The novelist, herself, being Rajasthani woman, stands a witness to the course and experience of the characters in the novel. The objective is to throw lights on the inner struggle towards the optimistic life style prevailed in the major characters of the novel. Sense of adjustment propounded by our forefathers is a hope for the current pessimistic society. The discussions contribute to enlighten and carry out the didactic elements of 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.

Inside the Haveli is a delightful novel. It gives the people insight into the day-to-day lives of the royal families of Rajasthan in India. The reader gets a glimpse into the family code and rules that govern the women of Rajasthan. There is space for sympathy, support, and at times, divisive judgement. Slowly Geeta, the protagonist introduces changes in the functioning of the Haveli, but at the same time submits into its tradition.

The novel, *Inside the Haveli*, is in itself a skillful interweaving of social observation and autobiography. Rama Mehta and Geeta, the protagonist of the novel, have a great deal in common. The novelist, like the protagonist, has been a sprightly, open-minded, western-educated girl. After her education at Nainital and St. Stephen's (Delhi), she has been selected to the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). She has resigned the same when she marries to Shri Jagat Mehta, a fellow IFS Officer. She takes up residence at Udaipur which has been her husband's native place. Their residence has been known as Jiwan Niwas where she has been looked after by two maids-Pari and Dappu. Mehta has given birth to a daughter and the child has been named Vijay. All this echoes the fate of Geeta, the focus on *Inside the Haveli*, who is an educated and vivacious girl. She is married to a conservative and traditional family of Udaipur and she abruptly finds herself living in Purdah in her husband Ajay's ancestral Haveli, Jiwan Niwas.

Geeta's life is confined to the walls of the Haveli with its endless maze of rooms and retinue of servants. The moment she lands in Udaipur, she is chastised for being bare faced and made to realize that she is

an outsider even by the maids of the Haveli who had come singing to the railway station to receive the new bride: "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?" (

Another peculiar and intriguing factor she encounters is that there are different apartments for the males and females of the Haveli. The servants have their separate quarters. The upper class women observe strict purdah and do not interact with their men folk during the day. The males conduct their business from their own separate apartments and their visits are announced beforehand. No such rules are applicable to the maids and servants.

Geeta feels subdued and lonely in the Haveli. Her movements are diffident and clumsy in the beginning. Moreover, she is a matter of curiosity for the women of other Havelis as well. On the very first day the women declare: "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (29). While her mother-in-law, on the other hand, likes to show them that even an educated girl can be moulded. It is her mother-in-law's considerate and sympathetic attitude towards her, and the love and care of her husband that facilitate her adjustment to her new environment.

Gradually, she learns and comes to respect some of the traditions, yet her occasional outbursts are clearly indicative of the fact that she is not prepared to surrender her individuality completely. On being reminded by Dhapu, her personal maid, to restrain herself in showing affection towards her newborn daughter Vijay publicly, she bursts out: "Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here...I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don't tell me what I should do with my own child!" (32).

On such occasions, Geeta finds herself trapped and a prisoner in the Haveli with only a ray of hope that her husband might shift to Delhi, as has been promised to her. Contrary to her initial awe and fear of her parents-in-law, Geeta finds gentle considerate concern in them as she comes to know them better. When Ajay Singh is offered a job at the Delhi University, his mother tells Geeta not to think of the old people or the Haveli, but to think of their own happiness. She tells her:

I want to tell you that Babu(Ajay) 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...I am a mother, I want to see my children happy and fulfilled... There are at times when you must not think of the Haveli.(140)

But time passes and Vijay is now a school going girl. On an impulse, Geeta also decides to send Sita, the daughter of the maid Lakshmi, to school. Sita is a motherless girl and exactly of Vijay's age. Education for a servant girl is a very bold decision by Geeta. She gets the support of her father-in-law, while all the servants and the maids of the Haveli and her mother-in-law criticize her for this decision. The Haveli culture requires total and unquestioned submission to its rules and conventions, so the women are kept enclosed within the gigantic walls. As Rama Mehta herself observes that the educated women are less keen to uphold older values that they find repressive, harsh and mostly meaningless.

Despite all the disorientation and criticism, Geeta succeeds in sending Sita to school and the attitude of the maids and the Haveli women mellows down. She does not stop here and starts classes for the Haveli maids and their children. Ajay and her father-in-law praise her for her efforts: "You did the right thing; I am proud of you. It is time for new ideas to enter the Haveli says Ajay Singh with conviction" (137). But for Geeta's mother-in-law, it is again a whim on her part and she confides in Pari: "Let Binniji amuses herself. Her enthusiasm won't last long; she will soon get tired of the women. Then let us see what she starts next" (161).

Geeta continues with her efforts to bring education to the servants. Manji Bua sa, Geeta's cousin-in-law, comes complaining to her mother-in-law about the classes that Geeta holds in the Haveli. She finds the behaviour of the maids who attend Geeta's classes wayward and expresses her fear about the future of the Haveli culture. Bhagwat Singhji's wife feels wounded. She defends her daughter-in-law before others but does not approve of her work. Geeta experiences an emotional turbulence.

At the same time, she is overwhelmed with admiration and gratitude for her mother-in-law. She feels remorse and responsible for tarnishing the image of the Haveli. In upholding the dignity of the Haveli, she finds herself one with her mother-in-law and says to herself: "How dare anyone say a word against the Haveli, these classes are not worth continuing. I will stop the girls from coming." And she says to her mother-in-law, "Bhabhi, it's my entire fault; please, forgive me. I should never have permitted the girls to join the classes; from tomorrow, I will tell them not to come" (170).

In fact, this incident forced her to think herself as the future custodian of the family tradition. She declares to herself "I don't want to leave Udaipur now. 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 would I get this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house" (170).

Her initial awe and fear of her parents-in-law turn into respect and devotion towards them, when she finds them considerate, affectionate, flexible and accommodative. All her defences give way and she finds herself a willing prisoner in the Haveli when they give Ajay and Geeta permission to shift to Delhi if they wish

to do so. Thus the silent, subtle and gradual transformation in the Haveli proves that an educated woman can play a significant role in the modernization of those sections of the society wherein women still live under superstition and rigid conventions.

The conflict between tradition and modernity over the marriage of Vijay comes to a climax in the last section of the novel. Geeta's eldest daughter Vijay is just thirteen years old when Daulat Singh's wife gives a proposal to the mistress of Jeewan Niwas for the marriage of Vijay with her grandson Vir Singh. Before them Geeta somehow controls her anger. Geeta makes her maximum efforts to adjust and adapt to her new home and culture. Yet she cannot sacrifice herself completely at the altar of marriage. When Ajay comes to her, she bursts out unmindful of the decorum of her language:

I have put with enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend any more. I won't ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child. You are all a bunch of hypocrites. My daughter's marriage is my concern; I will never agree to Vijay's engagement like this, no matter what happens. Even if it were the son of Maharana of Udaipur, I wouldn't agree. (171)

However, her arrogance and rebellion spirit are humbled by Bhagwat Singh's emotional appeal to her: "Binniji, I have been agitated for the last few weeks; I have looked at the proposal from every angle. I am still not quite sure whether it is right to engage a girl as you as our Vijay. But a girl has to marry, if not today, then tomorrow" (247).

At one moment Geeta thinks of telling him that she loves and trusts his judgement. But she fails to express her feelings. She undergoes the trauma of tension in decision and conflict within herself. She has realized the wisdom of the words, but still she feels uneasy. Finally, her father-in-law's illness makes it clear to her that he likes the alliance. When he dies, Geeta weeps bitterly like a common Indian woman. But her mother-in-law reminds her of her responsibility as the mistress of the Haveli and comforts her:

Don't cry my child, your father-in-law lived honourable. He has gone, leaving you the mistress of this house. If you loved him, you will keep this Haveli as a trust for your children. He did his duty by us all. Now it is your turn. Don't weep. If you don't show strength now, to whom shall I look for comfort? You are all I have; everything else has gone. (264)

Two things lead Geeta to accept Vir Singh's proposal for 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's marriage will not take place before the completion of her education changes her mind. Geeta is conformist and non-conformist. She conforms to the modern values of education and marriage. She makes herself fit in the unbroken chain of the cultural heritage. Rama Mehta's success lies in harmonizing the two divergent trends.

The novel delineates two different antithetical concepts of tradition and modernity and amalgamates heterogeneous ideologies. Geeta's objective is sociologically significant in rebuilding Indian society and family life by wedding these two concepts. The Haveli represents tradition, narrowness, and servitude of women and shackles of freedom. Geeta emerges out a representative of modernism, rationalism, new outlook and emancipated woman.

The book 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. The key concept here seems to be that of renunciation. In the words of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "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 dependent move with the times, making sure of each forward step" (213). Geeta has firm belief in the solidarity of the family which serves as an anchor. Haveli cannot be a prison for 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, sacrifices 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*. Women, religion, purdah, issue of dowry, issue of girl child and childhood marriage are taken up in this novel with great concern. This novel echoes the voice of protest at various levels, especially through the women characters.

II. Conclusion

Rama Mehta skillfully and meticulously sounds out the culture in the novel. For Geeta, the protagonist, the Haveli seems to contain elements of mutual support and love. Geeta's strategy is negotiation, not transmutation. Her sense of tradition is transformed a bit from within. She takes over the voice of tradition by the end. Geeta changes tradition and her vision as well. We see relaxations; we see its rules altered, we see it as a language learned and spoken even by this Bombay girl. She makes it a living in a lively structure. She has walked through a journey of protest, gradual transformations and a matured acceptance of reality. Her sense of

adjustment is from both within herself and among the Haveli people. Thus it is a success for Geeta whose character has semblances of Rama Mehta's personal life.

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