

Feminists Challenges in Rama Mehta's "Inside the Haveli"

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines Rama Mehta's acclaimed book "Inside the Haveli", which delves into two prominent themes in Indian English literature: the contemporary women and gender identity. Championed the rights of Indian women, drawing inspiration from prominent Western feminists including Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Gubar, and Spivak. She vehemently denounced the oppression of women and the unjust treatment based on gender. Rama Mehta has a distinct and individual perspective on the process of Indian assimilation into tradition. She adopts the role as a catalyst, bringing fresh perspectives to tradition and modernity. Rama Mehta's novel Inside the Haveli is a notable example of how writing reflects literature and how artists shape it. The story not only depicts a vivid portrayal of the Haveli in Rajasthan, but also serves as an authentic testament to the culture of the ladies in that region. Inside the Haveli explores the character of Geeta, who portrays the role of a model housewife and a model daughter-in-law. The story derives its feminist perspective from Geeta's unwavering examination of her own identity as an autonomous person. Geeta attains a sense of safety and stability by means of reconciliation. She vigorously defends the contemporary principles that have always guided her life. The central theme of the story is about achieving a state of harmony and understanding between the contrasting concepts of modernity and tradition, rather than focusing on either triumph or loss. This article proposes that for a contemporary educated woman like Geeta to achieve pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfilment, it is advisable for her to engage in a meaningful activity inside the confines of her home. This will allow her to assert her rights, follow her ambitions, and experience both the challenges and triumphs that come with it. The Nineteenth century saw a resurgence of Indian dominion, as well as significant advancements in women's education and freedom. Following this significant advancement, several women saw a rise in their spiritual and psychological well-being. Balance and harmony are crucial components of a tranquil and purposeful existence. However, regrettably, our contemporary lifestyle is characterised by everything except balance and harmony. The pervasive chaos and confusion, prevalent in both the eastern and western regions, regarding the future of our species, serve as evidence of this.

Indian women authors in post-colonial times challenged prevailing societal conventions and expanded the limits of conventional gender roles by endowing their main characters with a distinct sense of self and an independent voice. Rama Mehta's literature focuses on the introspective realm of a contemporary, educated, and accomplished young lady who triumphs in forging her own distinct identity within a culture that is both patriarchal and deeply rooted in tradition. She tries to provide a sincere depiction of the anguish, letdowns, and vexations experienced by her main character, 'Geeta'. Following her studies at Nainital and St Stephen's College, Delhi, she has been chosen to join the Indian Foreign Service. She relinquishes her esteemed profession upon marrying Shree Jagat Mehta, a science Assistant Professor. Upon her

arrival in Udaipur, her family veiled her countenance, marking her transition from the contemporary world to the traditional realm. She perceives her existence as that of an extraterrestrial. She resides in Udaipur, the hometown of her spouse. Their residence, which is really a grand palace, is famously referred to as "Jeevan Nivas" or "Haveli".

In the narrative, Haveli serves as a metaphor for obscurity, isolation from the outside world, and is enveloped in several enigmas, inquiries, and stillness. It provides insights into ancient times, historical periods, culture, traditions, traditional communities, and conservative individuals. A haveli is essentially a structure consisting of several rooms, enclosed by sturdy and imposing walls that provide a challenge to get beyond. Typically, when we use this term, we associate it with Rajasthan - a desert region known for its diverse population, traditional attire, language, and grand mansions called havelis. This tale portrays the city of Udaipur and its haveli.

Mehta tries to elucidate the inner mechanisms of a "haveli" in Rajasthan, a social arrangement characterised by a feudal hierarchy. In order to do this, Mehta chooses to keep some phrases intact instead of translating them. These include terms related to family and address, such as "Bai Sa, Bua Sa, Kaki Sa, Mami Sa", the honorific "ji" affixed to names, and even names of delicacies like "roti" and "laddoo". Mehta translates some expressions that she deems unintelligible to her English-speaking readers, phrases that also capture the essence of the location and the period, such as the customary blessing of "May you have eight sons" or "May the haveli flourish forever." The narrative provides extensive explanations, mostly for the advantage of Geeta, the most recent addition to the haveli, but also for the benefit of readers who are unfamiliar with Rajasthani and haveli practices.

This story explores the role, place, and challenges faced by women in a very conservative society as they strive to establish their own sense of identity. This work also portrays the early stages of societal transformation in the lives of women living in the haveli of Udaipur. Upon arriving at the haveli, she quickly came to the realisation that marriage serves as a confining enclosure for women. They lack personal space, privacy, and must endure the constraints imposed by conservative individuals adhering to conventional norms. The husband and wife reside in separate sections of the haveli, with no communication between them. Women's lives in the haveli are governed by strict rules and expectations, which restrict their freedom and confine them like caged birds. There is no existence beyond the haveli. Geeta found it very challenging to live the remainder of her life in purdah. However, she was compelled to stay in that location since her husband, who had strong traditional values, was emotionally devoted to his parents and unwilling to leave Udaipur. There was no means of escaping the confinement of the haveli, but eventually she began to adapt to the customs and practices of the haveli. Within the Haveli, a perpetual quiet prevails, inhibiting any kind of communication between individuals. Consequently, the ladies living in the Udaipur Haveli are unable to articulate their emotions and ideas. They are only passive observers and adherents of the norms and regulations established by a society that is mostly controlled by men.

The existence inside the haveli is monotonous and tedious, without any opportunity for novel concepts and advancements. Geeta's education proves to be fruitless as she experiences a lack of progress or growth. Psychologists note that experiencing emotions such as defeat, neglect, and apathy may lead to a state of "self-abnegation" in the Freudian sense, which can result in a fractured sense of self and a morbid state of mind. According to Bernard Weiner, experiencing

emotions such as melancholy, poor self-esteem, embarrassment, and a lack of confidence in one's ability to succeed might cause a person to avoid participating in social activities. Geeta has a strong inclination for reading books, yet she lacks a conducive environment for reading. The haveli, as described by Rama Mehta, is ancient and devoid of vitality, like an aged banyan tree. Mehta states that Sangram Singh ji's haveli, like several others belonging to the aristocracy, is situated in a narrow lane. However, similar to a banyan tree, once it had established its roots, it began to expand. Currently, the haveli is equipped with several courtyards and a multitude of rooms. "Its roots have firmly entrenched in the soil and nothing can destabilise the foundations . . ." The critics contend that the stones of the haveli epitomise a lifeless, monotonous, and stagnant existence in Udaipur. Srinivasa Iyengar makes an ironic statement, stating that inside the haveli, everything is tied by tradition. While this brings strength and security, it also leads to isolation and lack of progress.

Havelis also adhere to the pardah system. That signifies reverence for older people, adherence to ancient customs and etiquette, but only if ladies want to engage in such practices. This is mostly seen among the higher echelons of society. These individuals adhere to this tradition rigorously. Pari, the head housekeeper of the haveli, informs Geeta that we observe purdah. It is imperative that your attractive face remains unseen by unfamiliar eyes.

The comment above highlights the perils of the Purdah system. Despite never having engaged in direct communication with her husband's grandpa and father, Geeta has lived in isolation from the males. Even after a span of two years, her father-in-law and his father remained unfamiliar to her. She had never spoken a single word to them. Sudhir Kakar observes that communication with older males is limited, or may not occur at all, due to the cultural expectation for them to maintain a formal and reserved demeanour in the face of newcomers. Geeta discovers that she is restricted from leaving the Zenana part of the haveli. On one occasion, she casually enters the audience hall. She gazes in admiration at the ornately decorated pictures of her husband's ancestors. Observing the resolute countenances, Geeta felt a sense of pride, surmising that these individuals were likely the kind of men who had engaged in and emerged victorious from conflicts against the Moghuls. In the story, the presence of veiled women symbolises the social status of an affluent household. Women are prohibited from accessing the section of the haveli that is exclusively designated for males. Upon entering her husband's home after marriage, Geeta, who had previously lived in a society where men and women freely interacted, is told to conform to the customs and rules of the haveli, including the need to constantly have her face veiled. She is compelled to adhere to the strict rules of conduct that revolve on the ceremonial act of concealing herself from both males and older women. Geeta is compelled to isolate herself and conceal her face, even on the joyous occasion of her own daughter's birth. Therefore, she retracts her sari. Occasionally, she has difficulty in distinguishing individuals due to their lowered heads and concealed faces, resulting in a uniform appearance among everyone.

This rule of behaviour is relatively new and bothersome, especially for Geeta, who comes from a sophisticated civilization where such things are unimaginable. That is the reason why the ladies of the haveli firmly think that she will never adapt or conform. She does not belong to our group. However, Geeta, in her exploration, quickly realises the advantageous features of veiling as it provides her with the opportunity to contemplate while others engage in conversation.

The work is heavily imbued with cultural customs and traditions. The major tension arises from the strong influence of tradition on the mindset of the residents in the haveli, juxtaposed with the introduction of modernity by Geeta. The haveli in the story symbolises Indian cultural heritage, while the heroine, Geeta, who is an educated girl from Bombay, embodies contemporary values and ideas. The struggle between tradition and modernity emerges when Geeta arrives to the haveli, a traditional and conservative household, as a bride. Even the reticent ladies in the haveli see her as an outsider and question her capacity to adjust. The evocative and symbolic juxtaposition between the ancient city and the contemporary city of Udaipur, with regards to the disparity in lifestyle and perspectives, illuminates the core clash between tradition and modernization. The traditional women in the haveli likewise willingly adhere to the patriarchal constraints. Geeta perceives these limitations as stifling, and her autonomous and forward-thinking mindset brings several contemporary ideas, such as providing education to females regardless of their social status. The haveli undergoes subtle modifications throughout time. Geeta has a subtle metamorphosis and realises that traditions are not only oppressive legacies inherited from previous generations, but they also provide her with strength, comfort, and a sense of security. Geeta resolves the problem by demonstrating her flexibility and receiving the care and affection of her parents-in-law.

Geeta found the situation challenging due to her urban background and affiliation with contemporary society. She was unexpectedly thrust into a different cultural setting, which caused difficulties for her in terms of social adaptation. However, Geeta acknowledges that her in-laws exhibit a kind and kind nature towards her. Geeta is not subjected to any restrictions, rules, or limitations, which allows her to experience bliss beyond the obstacles. As a result, she chooses to initiate societal improvements and reforms specifically for the ladies residing in this haveli. She initiates literacy sessions for them and enrolls the girls in school. As an educated young woman, she understands the significance of education in challenging traditional beliefs. She believed that education would lead women to alter their mindset and comprehend the significance of identity, personal autonomy, and egalitarianism, particularly in the context of marriage, where both spouses are seen as equals. There will be an absence of a patriarchal society and individuals would have autonomy over their own lives. While it is important to embrace tradition, we should not compromise our identity in the face of strict rules and expectations set by orthodox individuals. Geeta embarks on a social reform journey, facing initial resistance from her female relatives. However, her father-in-law stands by her side, recognising that the lives of women in the haveli resemble that of caged birds. He acknowledges that this way of life is not sustainable, as education holds the power to liberate women from their confinement and enable them to become self-reliant individuals.

Geeta's contemporary ideas and forward-thinking perspectives, for which she has previously faced challenges, persist to this day. Geeta has received two significant permissions from her husband's strict family as a result of her effort. The permissions mentioned are the entitlement of girls to get education regardless of their social status, and the right of mothers to have a say in their daughters' marriages, particularly to avoid the harmful practice of child marriage, which is widely accepted due to traditional norms. However, these triumphs never lead her to underestimate the customs of the haveli or the traditional individuals. Geeta's adaptation, compromise, and tolerance facilitate the resolution of the struggle between tradition and modernity. The solicitude and attentiveness of her spouse and his family also contribute to her

acquisition of this mixture. Geeta demonstrates her versatility and willingness to compromise, allowing her to fully embrace life in the haveli and ultimately assume the role of its mistress.

After the death of Bhagwat Singhji, his son Ajay assumes control of the haveli as the new master, while Geeta takes on the role of the new mistress. The tale concludes with the assurance that the incoming mistress will establish a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity. She will uphold the beneficial traditional principles and embrace contemporary ideals when deemed appropriate. The narration by Rama Mehta and Geeta's quest for identity in the traditional haveli come to a positive and hopeful conclusion. However, the death of Bhagwat Singhji and the mourning clothes worn by his wife evoke sympathy and bring tears to the eyes of the readers who are deeply engaged in Geeta's journey within the haveli.

The book is comprehensively examined via the lens of four significant discourses: gender, class, tradition, and culture. The discussion on gender adds a feminist perspective to the story. The film centres on themes of identity crisis, patriarchal ideologies, and other gender-related concerns. The second approach focuses on the class structure depicted in the literature. In addition to the discussion on social class, the presentation also includes historical facts and transformations. The story thoroughly and properly explores the struggle between tradition and modernity. All of these ideas are included within the structure of this work of fiction. Rama Mehta's meticulous observations of society and her sociological discoveries provide power and expression to these subjects. *Inside the Haveli* is lauded for its exquisite structure and storytelling, while also conveying the feeling and realism of a social study. Due to the significant subject aspects, the book *Inside the Haveli* is distinguished as a prominent cornerstone in the realm of Indian English literature.

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