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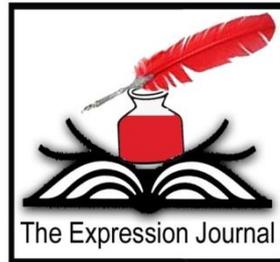
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**SERVITUDE, PURDAH AND PROTEST:
AN ANALYSIS OF RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI***

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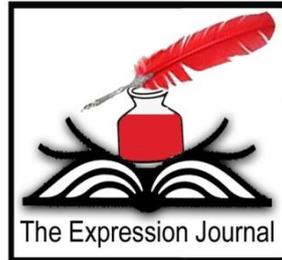
Abstract

Indian Writing in English is replete with many writers and these writers have taken various themes in their texts. Rama Mehta can be called a feminist, sociologist and a realist writer as she has depicted the real pictures of Indian women in her works. She was born in Nainital in 1923. She completed her post-graduation in philosophy from the University of Delhi. She was the first woman to enter the Indian Foreign Service but unfortunately, like many other women, she has to resign from her service due to patriarchal pressure. Her husband Jagan Mehta also belonged to the same cadre. Rama Mehta took writing as a profession as she thought to raise voice against gender discrimination and injustice. She can be called a dominant feminist voice and her works deal with one or the other stype of problem women face in their day-to-day life. She has been a woman who has seen the modern society and the traditional way of living of Indian women who are quite dependent on their husbands. That's why both the aspects such as tradition and modernity can be seen in her works. Rama Mehta has tried to show the importance of education through her works. Her novels *Ramu, A Story of India* (1966) and *The Life of Keshaw* (1969) also deal with the importance of education in boys' life. Likewise her novel, *Inside the Haveli* (1977) is not an exception and this novel also tells the importance of education for the girls and women. The glimpses of Rajputana culture are clearly seen in her novel where traditions and rituals are prioritized by men and education is not given any priority but in the present context, the importance of education can be seen in this novel through the main protagonist of this novel. The novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) has won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979. Though Geeta studied in co-educational institutions, yet she happily followed the traditions of her in-laws' haveli. She starts teaching the children of the servants of the haveli and opposes the decision of marriage in the early age for her daughter, Vijay. Many such themes have been taken for analysis in this paper.

Keywords

Traditions, Rituals, Rajputana Culture, Purdah, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy,
Child Marriage, Indian Women Novelists, Rama Mehta.

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The novel *Inside the Haveli* can be called a feminist novel. It deals with many social evils of the Indian society and it lays emphasis on the problems faced by women in Rajasthan under patriarchal system. As majority of Rajasthan is a land of sand, it is not fertile and the people do not have sufficient source of income in many areas, the inhabitants of these areas are highly conservative in approach and the women strictly observe purdah in those areas. Jasbir Jain writes that, "Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology" (Jain 243). Santosh Gupta also remarks, "Women are still confined to purdah and the men and women take pride in observing religiously age-old customs" (Gupta 200).

Rama Mehta wrote a number of books about the contemporary Indian women including the Western educated women. Her novel *Inside the Haveli* can be called a classical novel that deals with an independent young woman's struggle to hold on to her identity in a traditional environment.

When this novel was written, the girls were married at the early age and widows were not allowed to marry. The girls of the poor families did not go to school. All these problems have been raised in this novel. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar calls this novel "a sensitive piece of realistic fiction" (Iyengar 753). This novel can be called an attack on the patriarchy and orthodoxy. The girls and women had to live their life under the strict control of man-dominated society and they were deprived of their rights also.

The novel describes the adventures of the main protagonist Geeta who was married at the age of nineteen and comes to Udaipur from Mumbai after her marriage with Ajay, a science professor. Geeta is told by her mother to remain silent because she thought that it is the secret of a successful marriage for a woman. Geeta tries to change certain repressive practices of the haveli.

The novel has minor characters also who also help in the development of the story. Lakshmi, Hiralal, Sita, Khyali, Gangaram, Pari, Vijay, Ajay, etc. also play an important role in this novel. Geeta, the main female protagonist of this novel, comes to Udaipur after her marriage with Ajay, Professor and the Head of the Department of Physics at Udaipur University. Geeta

was married at the age of nineteen and she studied in co-educational school and college. But after her marriage, she feels like a caged-bird, "Two years ago when she left her parents' home in Bombay, she did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women" (Mehta 15). Geeta's in-laws did not want her to continue her education after her engagement with Ajay. Rama Mehta writes about it, "They don't want Sita to continue going to school" (Mehta 187).

When the novel opens, it tells about the gender discrimination and poverty of the servants. The opening of the novel narrates the birth of Sita, the daughter of a servant Gangaram and the birth of Vijay, the daughter of Geeta. Sita's father was apprehensive about this event but he was expecting the birth of a baby-boy this time. The delivery of Gangaram's wife is conducted by a midwife while Geeta's delivery is conducted by a lady doctor. This indicates the class difference. Moreover, when Gangaram hears the cry of the child, he utters, "It is a girl...Gangaram took a long puff of his pipe and then threw it away in disgust" (Mehta 7). Khyali, the cook, was also sitting with him in the verandah of the haveli. He tries to sympathise with him by saying some words which show the patriarchal mindset of the Indian society. He says, "Girls are a burden I admit but what can one do once they are born" (Mehta 8). Gangaram thinks that his mistress will give birth to a baby-boy because they are rich and lucky people. He curses his fate and thinks that rich get easily what they want. He says, "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).

Another issue that has been raised in this novel is the very tough life of the servants because they have to work continuously for the haveli and they are paid less for their work. These servants and maids do not get proper rest because their duties are heavy. Their duties would become more difficult if children would fall ill or if there is any problem in the haveli, especially with 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).

Pari is the oldest maid-servant of the haveli and she tells that she has not taken rest for the past twelve hours. Though there were fifteen servants in the haveli and out of them eight were maid servants but she, being the most experienced and reliable maid of the haveli, handled all the important works herself. Her hectic schedule can be seen from these words, "I have been on the feet for the last twelve hours" (Mehta 8). Other maid-servants' condition is also not much better.

Pari gets irritated when the lady doctor suggests cleanliness and silence after Geeta's delivery because the maid-servants do not think that giving birth to a child is a big thing. Pari also does not agree with doctor's advice and she says angrily, "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). Their tight schedule can be understood from their decision of getting pregnant and giving birth to child because they think that in this way, they will get some time for rest otherwise they do not get time for rest. Lakshmi says in this context, "I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and only for twenty one days" (Mehta 12).

Udaipur is also a pink city like Jaipur and many havelis can be easily seen in it because Rajputana culture is still prevalent in Udaipur. When this novel was written, the situation was more different because there was not much emphasis on the education at that time and the poor people who did not have proper money to feed their children would leave their children in these havelis to work as maids and servants because they thought that their children will

not die due to starvation. But the life of the maids and servants was not quite good in these havelis. Pari was also one of those servants because her parents left her in the haveli when she was merely ten-year-old. She got marriage at the early age and became widow soon. There was no provision of the remarriage for these widows and these widows had to live their life full of restriction. They were not allowed to wear other than white clothes. Moreover, they were given very ordinary food. All these sensitive themes have been narrated by Rama Mehta in this novel.

Pari knew this haveli for four generations and that's why she had a good and respectable place in the haveli. She "had already known four generations of the family, shared in the joys of births and of marriages, in the sorrow of death and misfortunes of the haveli" (Mehta 9). She would give instruction even to the daughters-in-law of the haveli. Rama Mehta writes about it, "The new daughters-in-laws looked to her for guidance and followed her instructions when they came to the haveli as brides" (Mehta 9-10). Pari tells her story to Lakshmi that even after years of the death of her husband; she is not able to take her decisions independently. She says, "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 lives of widows through this novel. There are few women including maid-servants in the haveli who are widows. Manji Bua Sa also narrates the moving story of her widowhood. She shares her woes, "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).

Geeta noticed that the victim women blame on their destiny for it. She gets annoyed when she hears such kinds of nonsense talks. Not only Bhua Sa, Kanta, a cousin-in-law also wants to say the same thing and she thinks that women are "rooted in ignorance and superstition" (Mehta 137). Geeta understands everything in a better way. She knows it well that all this is being happened due to the bad customs of the haveli. Thus, Bhua Sa and Maid servants also have to suffer everything due to the bad customs of the haveli.

Though these women were the victim of the patriarchal system and the traditions of the haveli and they were trying to come out from these rotten system. Gaikwad also contends, "It seems to her that they are waiting to be freed from the confinement" (Gaikwad 167) but it is also clear that none of them was ready to protest. It was only Geeta who takes some bold step in the haveli otherwise other women characters of the haveli do nothing to break the rules of the haveli.

Geeta comes to sense about the environment of the haveli since the very first day when she puts her first step at Udaipur Railway Station. One of the maid servants rebukes her and tells her to observe purdah. She says by pulling Sari on her face, "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world" (Mehta 17). Geeta notices that her husband has not come to receive her, instead two cousins-in-laws and four women have come in a four-sitter Fiat car. She feels very suffocated in the car. She finds the environment of the haveli also quite strange as both men and women followed the rules of the haveli. "Like everyone else in the haveli there was a form that men maintained too" (Mehta 21). Shahji Gaikwad also observes in this context, "Geeta feels suffocated in the haveli" (Gaikwad 166).

Geeta has not seen her husband's father and grandfather even after two years of her marriage because there were different chambers of men and women in the haveli and women

were not allowed to enter men's chamber. Geeta was not allowed to meet her husband during the day and she could see her husband only at night because all the men of the haveli would go outside in the morning and would return by evening. Geeta's husband would understand Geeta's problem and he would come sometimes at one or the other pretext. He would cooperate with Geeta. He convinces her saying:

"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 would feel stifled in this environment and one day she enters the men's chamber out of curiosity and one maid servant again stops her from going there. Geeta is called an outsider and the maid-servants proclaim that she is not among those who can adjust. Geeta protests at few points but she respects the value of Indian traditions and follows the rules made by the elders of the haveli.

Geeta's husband gets an opportunity of another job at Delhi but he does not join this job because he thinks that his father would remain alone there and it would be quite difficult for him to live here alone. Though Geeta pressurizes Ajay many times to leave Udaipur but he persuades her every time.

Even after seven years of her marriage, Geeta feels like a stranger in the haveli. She thinks, "Even after seven years I am strangers to those that I think are mine, and I will always remain stranger" (Mehta 105). At last, the time comes when Geeta does not want to leave this haveli. 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).

When Geeta's daughter Vijay starts going to school, Laskshmi's daughter Sita is not allowed to accompany her to go to school together. One day Vijay asks out of curiosity, "If I can go to school, why can't Geeta?" Geeta had no answer of this question. This question of an innocent girl makes her think about it. When she says to Pari, "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). Even other women of the haveli were against it. Manji Bua Sa, a cousin of Bhagwat Singhji also tells Geeta that servants' daughter's sending to school can disturb the life of haveli. Her husband Ajay supports Geeta here also. Chotte Lal Khartri also argues, "In this enterprise Ajay always stands by her as a docile fellow" (Khatri 106). Geeta starts teaching the children and the women of the haveli and it was a very bold step by Geeta and her husband also laughs at Geeta's bold steps and he also thinks that Geeta will bring drastic changes in the environment of the haveli. He remarks, "You did the right thing. I am proud of you. It is time for the new ideas to enter the haveli (Mehta 137).

Geeta takes another bold step when her daughter's marriage proposal comes from a very aristocratic family from Udaipur. Vijay was only thirteen-year-old at that time and Geeta lost her control when she comes to know about it. She bursts out:

"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)

Geeta comes to know that the boy Vir Singh was still a college student and Vijay Bai Sa was minor and this marriage will not be suitable for both of them. She protests and 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).

Rama Mehta tries to show the emotionalism of women through this scene because it was the time when Geeta gets very outraged. She suffered everything herself silently but she was perturbed to see this injustice with her daughter also. She openly announces, "I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college" (Mehta 206). But when Geeta goes to see the boy at his house, she feels elated to see everything in the haveli. Nobody said anything to her but now Geeta was ready to marry her daughter in that family. Her mind changes to see the richness of the family.

Thus, the novel encompasses many problems of the society such as gender discrimination, purdah system, child marriage, refusal to widow marriage, servitude, exploitation of women and many more themes. The emotional nature of women also has been narrated in this novel. Dr. Bijender Singh comments 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. The novel is an attack on the orthodoxy and traditionalism of that man-dominated society. (Singh 1)

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