

# Patriarchal Pressure and *Purdah* in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

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### ABSTRACT

Women have been kept at the lowest level of the society since the very beginning of the human society. Men have dominated all kinds of tasks, professions and decisions. Every man wants to show his superiority and every woman has to follow his man. In the rural areas of India, the condition of women is still very bad. They are not given equal opportunities and they are still considered inferior and weak. The main problem arises when a metropolitan girl has to adjust in such environment. Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* is one of such novels whose central female character Geeta has to live in a conservative environment of Udaipur. She gets married in Udaipur but finds the things very shocking there because she is immediately ordered to observe *purdah* in order to follow the rules designed by men. She could not live her life freely there and finds the life very stifling and suffocating. She sacrifices her own happiness but when she finds that her daughter is not given the privileges and her marriage is being negotiated in the tender age, she rebels against this system and her efforts bring fruit. Thus, the paper is an attempt to analyse the biased system of the Indian society where men run the family and women are considered just to obey and please them.

**Keywords :** Haveli, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal Pressure, *Purdah*, Resistance, Success.

Rama Mehta's craft of novel writing is so appealing and poignant that readers cannot stop reading the whole novel. Her novels deal with the problems of women in the man dominated society. She has taken the trials and tribulations of Indian women in her novels. Her novel *Inside the Haveli* depicts the inner turmoil's of its central protagonist, Geeta who finds a cross cultural shock in the new environment of Udaipur. This haveli is a symbol of money, power and pride.

Rama Mehta had lived a liberated life in her father's home in Bombay. This novel narrates how a woman strives to find her space in the patriarchal society. Geeta gets this shock when she comes to her in-laws' city in Udaipur in train after her wedding. Her husband, Ajay is a Science professor. Geeta's parents wanted to get their daughter marry in a well-to-do family. Her parents consider him a suitable match for Geeta. She is lost in the nostalgic feeling in Udaipur and keeps thinking about her time spent at Bombay. The novel takes the readers two years back when she lived with her parents in Bombay, "Two years ago when she (Geeta) 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" (15). Even before her marriage she is advised by her mother in certain ways. Her mother wants to see her daughter happy in her in-laws' house so she tells her some important things that a woman must observe after marriage. Her mother knows the reality of the male-dominated society. She tells her daughter, "Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much." (16)

In this novel two cities Bombay and Udaipur are the symbols of the traditionalism and modernity respectively. The life of Bombay is very fast and people are very advanced there while in Udaipur the condition of women is not good. The novelist does not talk about the position of 21st century women. She tells the condition of women during the days the novel was written. Geeta thinks about her happy days spent at Bombay. The novel opens when she is already a married woman and has been living in the haveli. She remembers her entry in Udaipur and a group of women who advise her to observe *purdah*. The moment she put her step at the railway platform

at Udaipur her life starts under the instructions and orders:

The minute she had put her foot on the platform she was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. 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?' Geeta, bewildered, frightened managed to get in to the car without talking to the women who followed her, singing as loud as they could. . . [When] Geeta had lifted her face and pulled the sari back to see. 'No, no, you cannot do that,' Pari had snapped, pulling back the sari over her face. 'In Udaipur we keep *pardah*. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.'(17)

Thus, restrictions for Geeta start from the platform itself. This was the moment when she is caught in the patriarchal chains. There is a strange thing to note that these are the women in the novel who set the rules themselves now. The role of male characters is not much important in the novel. These are the women who devise the rules of the haveli. In fact, all these women are the silent sufferers and they have suffered a lot in their life. They have lived their life in the strict rules of the man dominated society but they think that other women should also follow these rules and they forget the generation gap and the change due to time.

*Purdah* has become a very serious problem in the in Hinsus and Muslims. In the Gulf countries women have to wear burka and *pardah* is a must for them. In the rural areas of India, women observe *pardah*. Hindus also force their wives for it in the villages and the backward places. In this novel also Geeta gets stuck in an environment which she has never seen.

In this novel she has to keep herself in the limits. Her husband, Ajay inwardly loves her a lot and she is not able to enjoy the liberty. One day her husband, Ajay proposes her to go for a drive but Geeta denies it saying, "No, I am not going out alone with you; the whole of Udaipur will be talking the minute we are out of gate" (166). All the actions of the haveli were governed by Geeta's father-in-law and grand father-in-law. The men rule the women: "In the haveli 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." (21)

The novel is an attack on the mentality of men. The birth of the female child is considered inauspicious and burdensome in the present context also. This is why the female feticide has emerged as a major problem in the much advanced states of India also. Women have become the enemies of women. They do not like the birth of a new baby and the birth of a female child is considered a burden in the poor families. There is an instance in the novel. There was a birth of Sita, daughter of maid Lakshmi and servant Gangaram her father shows no warm feelings at her birth. In fact, she had thought about the birth of a male child but unfortunately a female girl is born there. Gangaram takes a deep breath and says with grief that it is a cry of a female baby. Khyali, the cook, shows sympathy and says that now only god will help them, 'Why worry? God takes care of all those He sends into the world. Girls are a burden, I admit,' said Khyali with sympathy. (7-8) Not only this, even the mentality of the women is also something like that. When Geeta touches the feet of her grandmother she is blessed in these words, "May you have many many sons, my child, and may you always wears red" (33). Geeta could not understand the proper meaning of her words at that time but later she came to know the reality of the world.

When at nineteen Geeta had come as a bride at Jeewan Niwas (Haveli), she was lively and spontaneous. She had not been taught to stint in giving affection; nor was she taught to keep her feelings concealed. Her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind . . . In the haveli no one really expressed their feelings. They covered their emotions in an elaborate exchange of formal gestures and words. Even her husband talked to his parents as if they were dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties. (32)

Geeta's entry in the Haveli was a turning point in her life. When she comes in the haveli, she brings revolution there. She does not succumb to the

traditional systems of the society. She was a modern girl and she does not live like uneducated and maid servants of the haveli. She had lived in a much liberated environment of Bombay. Her entry makes others also suspicious about their existed system of the society, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (29).

Geeta's husband had a good nature and he cooperates her very much. He is a submissive husband and he does not want to oppose it. He wants to be an obedient son. He convinces Geeta about his helplessness, "I have not given up the idea of going to Delhi University. We will some day, but I do not know when. Just now my father needs me here. I do not want to leave him alone, he is getting old . . ." (53). Her husband is highly satisfied with Geeta's performance. He accepts everything:

This life in *purdah* is not meant for you . . . You are right, we men are spoilt, but surely you know how important you are to me. I never thought that you would also make my parents happy. Do you know, Geeta, I could never have been content in Udaipur had you not adjusted to the ways of the haveli. I would then have really run away from here . . . I am really proud of you, but that's little consolation to you. (52-54)

All the women are very sad at the environment of the haveli. They want to get free from that kind of environment. There is no any sign of complaint on their lips but they are not happy. In fact, they don't dare to talk like this.

In this novel, haveli is a strong symbol of traditionalism. Srinivasa Iyengar writes, "Within the haveli, all is tradition-bound, and while this means strength and security, it also means isolation and stagnation" (Iyengar 753). Geeta is also a symbol of change. She also gets acclimatized in the new environment of haveli. Geeta also changes herself in the haveli. Geeta herself adjeucts to some extent and she also does not want to break the rule of the haveli. But she breaks some rotten rules for the sake of others.

Lakshmi and Gangaram's daughter Sita is not allowed to go to school because she is a girl of a servant. Geeta's own daughter Vijay and Lakshmi's daughter, Sita both were born almost at the same peiord. When Vijay starts going to school, she asks her mother due to her childlike curiosity why Sita is not going to school. Geeta gets much disturbed by her daughter's question. Geeta immediately recommends for Sita's education. She says, "Pari ji, Sita must go to school" (198). It was Geeta due to whom she starts going to school. She starts teaching the children and maids of the haveli. The news of her classes pspreads like the fire of the forest or monsoon flood, "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) Another bold step she takes when there is a discussion of her daughter's child marriage. Her daughter Vijay was a school going immature girl and her marriage is negotiated. Vijay was merely thirteen year old. She remains adamant to her decision. She comes on the way and stops this child marriage. She feels much trapped in the haveli and she finds no any way of escape. But one thing is there that she does not put her daughter's life also at stake. Geeta repents over her decision:

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. (205-206)

Thus, one can conclude from this novel that Rama Mehta's effort to attack the traditionalism is a very big step. This novel depicts *purdah* as a necessary evil in the society. Rama Mehta has taken the gender discrimination and the prejudiced position of the society.

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