
**CONFLICT, NEGOTIATION, AND TRANSFORMATION: POSTCOLONIAL
READING OF RAMA MEHTA'S
*INSIDE THE HAVELI***

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to interpret Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* from the perspective of postcolonial concepts. The novel illustrates the position of women in a tradition-bound Indian society. Though everything is changing rapidly, women are still engulfed in a pattern of life that is alien to modern woman, like Geeta who has been brought up in Bombay and is married to Ajay, son of an ex-prime minister of a formerly princely state of Mewar. Geeta suffers in-betweenness; she is caught between the metro culture of Bombay and the traditional culture of a haveli in Udaipur. She is unable to reconcile with rigid etiquettes of the haveli, outdated way of life, the practice of *purdah* and so on. Her initial repulsion gradually disappears when she understands that her parents-in-law are essentially kind and compassionate. She adjusts herself and merges her identity with the tradition of her husband's family in order to bring in some reforms for the women of the haveli. She starts literacy classes for girl children since education is vital to social change. With her charismatic approach, she has nipped the rebellion in the bud and succeeds in her move towards transformation.

Keywords: *in-betweenness, ambivalence, purdah, female subordination, gender bias, othering, subaltern, alienation, inclusive and exclusive, emancipatory,*

Indian fiction has gained worldwide recognition and high critical acclaim after the nineteen sixties. Women writers too have enriched it through their contributions and have created a distinctive place for them in the genre of fiction. Some of them have been conferred with prestigious awards like Booker Prize, Commonwealth Prize, and Sahitya Akademi award in the Indian context.

The focus of this paper is to interpret Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* from the perspective of postcolonial concepts. Ambivalence is one of the key concepts of postcolonial

literature. The novel projects Jeevan Niwa's haveli ambivalently and the protagonist Geeta suffers in-betweenness; she is caught between the metro culture of Bombay and the traditional culture of a haveli in Udaipur. Homi Bhabha terms it as "in-between spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating new strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (2).

At the surface level, the novel explores the relationship existing within the community, their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living. But a schematic reading of the novel will at the deeper level disclose that Sangram Singhji's haveli is inclusive and exclusive, emancipatory and oppressive, and harmonious and discordant simultaneously. The novelist describes: "The haveli may have no shape from outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the woman of Udaipur kept purdah" (6). Geeta is ambivalent about her position in the haveli. She is not able to tune her mind and body to the traditional way of life of Udaipur and at the same, she is not able to go back to Bombay to restore her life of liberty.

Inside Haveli tells the story of the protagonist Geeta who lives her life in flux. She is a college-educated girl of Bombay and is married to Ajay, son of an ex-prime minister of the formerly princely state of Mewar and a professor of Physics at the University of Rajasthan. After her marriage, she has to leave the modern world of Bombay to settle in a traditional world of the haveli of Udaipur. She does not resist instantly but remains silent since she is going to start a new life. She experiences alienation, loneliness, marginalization, othering and cultural adjustments in the new environment. The potentially hostile unknown place and the people of haveli invoke a sense of fear and feeling of insecurity because she is considered as an outsider as she does not observe purdah. Jasbir Jain, in her article "Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah" states how purdah, in the Indian society, represents power relations:

The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination in built-in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology. (243)

Though Geeta detests covering her face with purdah, at times she finds it useful and convenient to hide her emotions and feelings. The writer herself makes the meaning of veiling ambivalent because of Geeta veils her face for her own reasons: "She came to love the veil that hid her face; this allowed her to think while others talked. To her delight, she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them" (23). Veiling the face masks the inner emotions. Since she is the only woman who goes around in haveli with uncovered face, other women call her an outsider. As Rama Mehta characterizes, Geeta does not accept the purdah system till the end. She not only resists veiling her face but also tries ending this system since it symbolizes physical restriction as well as a spiritual restriction.

Haveli symbolizes silence and harmonious living for the outsiders. But the women suffocate inside purdah. Women are not allowed to go out haveli and all activities are conducted inside. It has strict rules for women. Geeta remains in haveli for two years but she never has the opportunity to speak to her father-in-law or grandfather-in-law. Moreover, she has been forbidden meeting and talking with women during the day. Patriarchy has been subtly exercised and it is hinted by the novelist thus: "Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved" (19) No violence against women is outwardly shown. Hence, nobody is able to express their desire to go out and see the outside world.

Dislocation and belonging is the complex view of the postcolonial society. The sense of dislocation and the resultant conflict and confusion inside the haveli disturb Geeta much. She is caught between two opposing trends – modernity and tradition. She is nostalgic about her past. Geeta belongs to a different world where she has enjoyed full freedom. But haveli takes away her liberty. The conservative society forces her to come to terms with the lifestyle of the haveli. The rhythm of Bombay life still reverberates in her mind though physically distanced. Discarding the old and adapting herself to the new environment cause emotional displacement. The insurmountable suffering in the new environment alienates her and leads her to an identity crisis.

The kind of relationship Geeta has with her husband is only passive. It has been expected of her that she has to carry out her domestic chores, maintain her husband's prestige and create peace on the domestic space. Loomba, in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, cites her observation of how men have exerted their power in the family situation during colonial times: "strengthening of patriarchy within the family became one way for the colonized men to assert their otherwise eroded power" (184). Boehmer too says that Indian women have been marginalized by the colonizers and by the Indian men: "colonized women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste". (224)

Geeta has to sacrifice several things in the haveli. She has no companion who she can trust. Since she is from Bombay, she is considered as an outsider; men and women of haveli do not like to spend time with her and help her accustomed to the new environment. She is sad that even after seven years, she remains a stranger to her in-laws. Her husband Ajay understands her need but is afraid to "challenge his father's authority" (22). Geeta observes that men have been quite comfortable in haveli and they have been regarded as gods. They are the masters and "women kept their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care" (21). Women are expected to adhere to the norms and patterns they have been following for centuries. Even today they are considered to be properties of the men. Before marriage the fathers own them and

after marriage, they belong to their husbands. Women's freedom and rights are restricted to favorable marriage and safeguarding family's prestige.

Geeta finds herself engulfed and restrained haveli. Since she is treated as an outsider, even after years of stay she has not learned the etiquettes of Haveli and adapted herself to the environment; she becomes nervous when relatives gather. One of the maids ironically remarks, "She will never adjust, she is not one of us" (28). Frustrated and unable to compromise with the life in Haveli, Geeta pesters her husband Ajay to try for transfer to Delhi University. But he refuses bluntly. Angered by the sharp reply of her husband, Geeta remarks, "I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur; you are all pampered. You lead your lives and think women are mere chattels" (53).

As years pass and when her father-in-law dies, Geeta becomes subdued and seems to accept the culture of the haveli. She gets closer to her family members but does not accept the purdah system. Nowhere in the novel, Rama Mehta depicts Geeta raising her voice to speak loudly. From the start to the close of the novel, Geeta is silent. Her silence is ambivalent. Does the writer want to say that Geeta is always ready to listen to others or does she mean to say that women are not allowed to speak aloud? As Gayatri Spivak states in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Geeta often feels that she is emotionally, psychologically and physically confined and controlled. She reminisces her past; she thinks she is trapped in the haveli. She is ashamed of her education that has not inspired her to assert her identity. At last, she decides to break her long silence raises her voice to crush the walls of tradition that lie heavy on women. That is no reason why I should surrender; she was filled with rebellion and her face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the haveli (100). This realization makes her speak; she says that Sita, the daughter of maid Laksmi and servant Gangaram should be sent to school. Initially, opposition comes from Pari. Like her mother dealing with the servants in Bombay, Geeta authoritatively replies to Pari, "Sita must go to school!"(198) No negative strokes come from anybody afterward. Geeta succeeds in convincing both men and women in haveli regarding the need for education to women. Eventually, she brings some change in Haveli, through her teaching to the children of the servants and maids. Ajay appreciates his wife's boldness and is happy that she has initiated change in the haveli. But Geeta replies to him, "The change won't come as quickly as you think. You don't know the women here; they are all rooted in ignorance and superstition" (138).

Though there are instances to show that Geeta has taken an upper hand in revolutionizing the taboo customs and traditions without sacrificing family honor and certain other social customs, she has not succeeded in her effort completely. Women, like Pari, are still sunk in false beliefs. The writer ends the novel abruptly. Z. N. Patil remarks critically about the ambivalent ending of the novel thus:

...Geeta passing from out of the constricted, suffocating atmosphere of the haveli to some breezes of freedom. But Mehta's attitude towards this conflict between tradition and modernity is ambiguous. Nowhere do we hear the author talking either explicitly or implicitly against the traditional, autotelic world of the haveli. Neither does she explicitly talk in favor of the little freedom Geeta gets at the end of the novel. (32)

It appears that Geeta's position is ambivalent. Caught between two extremes of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, resistance and compromise, she tries to strike a balance between modernity and tradition in order to live peacefully.

Even after seven decades of Independence, Indian women have not found social freedom. The nation is still caught in the web of patriarchal prejudices, narrow mindedness, gender bias, discrimination, and marginalization. Women have not found economic, political and social freedom. There are thousands of women like Geeta who battle against the patriarchal society that erodes the identity of a woman and confines her to the cloistered life. Against all odds, they live their lives with hope and despair.

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