

QUEST FOR IDENTITY: GEETA'S FLIGHT FOR EMANCIPATION IN INSIDE THE HAVELI



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ABSTRACT

Inside the Haveli, a sensitive regional novel by Rama Mehta sumptuously delineates how an educated urbane girl Geeta with progressive thinking regarding women finds herself a prisoner in the oppressive environment of the Haveli, and how she struggles to liberate herself from the old conventions and transforms herself into the image of new Indian woman. Subordinating every wish and every desire at the altar of the Haveli, she incarnates into the role of a teacher involved in a literacy campaign.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of women novelists in India has considerably influenced the change in the attitude of the patriarchal Indic society. Women writers like Rama Mehta, Kamla Markandeya, Shobha De, Venu Chitale, Comelia Sorabji, Shashi Deshpande, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Arundhati Roy have remarkably contributed to a very effective portrayal of the agonized female psyche, her problems, her salutations, her suffering and then finally her emancipation. The revelation of the predicament of a woman in a man's world, and the agony by these writers has to some extent transformed the Indian male's psyche, thus reflecting a shift in the sensibility of the writer as well as the reader. Mehta's vigorous and extensive social work had helped her to keenly visualize the trials and tribulations of women in the patriarchal society. Her depiction of a woman's dilemma and quest for identity in this novel helped her to win the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1977.

OBSERVATIONS

Rajputana- the land of the Rajputs, the chivalrous class with a royal and glorious past has innumerable examples of the feminine power in the image of Padmini, Mirabai, Rani Hada and Panna Dhai who have carved a niche for themselves by proving their mettle and rebellion in some way or the other in history. Rama Mehta chose Udaipur a Rajputana city as a backdrop of her novel to befittingly reveal how the protagonist Geeta tries persistently to understand the stringent customs of the Haveli and preserve her identity of an educated woman, even behind the veil. Geeta is a vivacious modern, self respected, strong-willed, independent of making her own moves and exercising her own free will. In spite of these exemplary qualities she has to struggle much to carve out her own identity in a patriarch dominated Rajput Haveli. Geeta's first step into the Haveli turns out to be immensely shocking.

A veil is forcibly pulled on her face, signifying a concealment of her identity. "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'." (17) Geeta at once realizes that she would not only have to draw a veil on her face, but also on her vivacity and individuality too and would also have to succumb to the stringent and traditional customs of the Haveli. She very soon becomes aware that prejudice had surrounded her and the women folk of the Haveli including her mother-in-law had no confidence in her, whether it was related to her adjustment to the new environment or to the household work. "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (29), the women would prophesize. In all, she was "Ill-defined" in the family and in the Haveli.

Even the illiterate maids would indoctrinate Geeta in the ways and tradition of the family, and would often fabricate gossips around her. Such behavior irked Geeta, and she would find herself strangled in the suffocating atmosphere of the Haveli. She felt subdued and lonely, and at such times would think that even the open environment of the aristocratic grand Haveli failed to widen the horizons of thinking which seemed to be rooted into ignorance and superstition. Education had no value for them and a girl's education seemed an utterly wastage of time. They were of the conservative views that "the only duty was to serve her husband's family" (117). Under such gripping circumstances, the demure Geeta could not find comfort even in an otherwise comfortable palatial building. Her only respites were her childhood memories and her urbane life- a carefree life. "She had gone to college and studied with boys" and "her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind" but in the Haveli Geeta was supposed to observe reticence as a mark of decorum.

FINDINGS

Geeta realizes that sitting calmly and inactive

would only waste her life, so she musters up all courage to fight against this oppressive and negative atmosphere of the Haveli. She accepts the traditions and discipline of the Haveli without any protests, but her conduct now exhibits her passive or verbal rebellion in her future conduct. Her occasional outbursts are clearly indicative of the fact that she is not prepared to surrender her individuality completely. On maid Dhapu's reminder of restraining herself in showing affection towards her new born Vijay publically, Geeta bursts out "Stop lecturing me, I am fed up... don't tell me what I should do with my child"(32).

The motherly instincts of Geeta had now and henceforth become a strong pillar to support her own individuality. Geeta had indeed taken steps towards her own emancipation. The veil which had hidden her identity was shunned whenever possible and inhalation of fresh air gave Geeta not only a soothing feeling but a sense of freedom too. By doing so she feels that she has not completely submitted to the veil, and simultaneously feels that- "she often hid her own frustration at living in a constricted atmosphere" (53) and also feels that her veil was also a means to confine her agitation with herself and her fate.

"She could not go for higher studies. She was glad that no one can see her face and guess the agitation and uncertainties of her private world"(252). But behind the veil she would often think regarding the predicament of thousands of women who are subdued in a male dominating society and governance by rigid traditions and restrictions. She is also aware of the fact that the system of Purdah and patriarchy which have existed since a long time, no longer served the needs of the rapidly changing society because women were trying endlessly to show their potential by revolting against the marginalization they are subjected to. And like other women, Geeta too had to pay a good price for her emancipation. She had bartered "her exuberance, her girlish impetuosity and had forgotten her own carefree childhood" (87). The unchanging traditions of the Haveli had inhibited her nascent laughter and her juvenile freedom; yet her faith in her own destiny and independence could not be robbed from her. She is able to effectively and assertively convince Ajay her husband and father-in-law to allow her to educate not only Vijay and Sita but also other downtrodden children of Udaipur. Her dream of literacy campaign takes shape in form of a school, which she runs successfully and triumphantly

in the vicinity of the Haveli. He confirms his faith once again in her by saying "You did the right thing, I am proud of you. It is time for new ideas to enter the Haveli".

INFERENCE

In Jeewan Niwas, despite its patriarchal character, Geeta exists as an independent woman, who through her inner strength, determination, education, and her potential, finds her voice and establishes her identity in the campaign for literacy. Even women who had once criticized and chided her are forced to say "which one of our daughters or daughter-in-laws has brought the gift of learning to the poor"(151) and Geeta is proudly called 'the Haveli's greatest ornament'. What more glowing and praiseworthy accolades can a daughter-in-law be showered by her conservative in-laws? Geeta is definitely a progressive woman with a vision of her own. In her journey for emancipation, Geeta is seen moving slowly but surely from the position of subordination to empowerment, from silence to speech, and this strategy was very decisively chosen by Geeta herself who had through self-examination and self-searching come to the conclusion that firstly she could never completely free herself from the unbreakable bonds of the Haveli and the veil, and whatever she has to do had to emanate from Jeewan Niwas and from the Purdah and that she has only limited resources to relocate herself. Secondly she also realizes that sitting silent and wasting one's education was not the answer. So she works and changes her situation of despair to hope. 'The novelist has given due stress on the mental crisis of the protagonist and her spirit to face the situations in life.'(Kulkarni 227) Dr. A.G Khan rightly avers that "Mehta deserves commendation that she did not allow her protagonist to succumb to stagnation or helplessness."(43) Rama shows great sensitivity and awareness in imparting a meaning to her fictional Geeta, and is also successful in effectively exhibiting the vivid and panoramic portrayal of women's relation to tradition and modernity, and through Geeta's flight for emancipation, Rama Mehta exerts her own progressive views regarding women. Thus, the victory and fulfillment of Geeta too lies in the fact, that she liberates herself from the strangulating traditions, and she embarks triumphantly on her flight towards emancipation in spite of being caged in the Haveli. As an amalgamation of tradition and modernity, Geeta is definitely a role model for thousands of women who are caught in the complexity of dilemma of traditions and modernity even today.

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