

Between Walls and Whispers: Unveiling the Struggle of Servants and Women in Rama Mehta's Novel *Inside the Haveli*

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Abstract

Rama Mehta, an accomplished Indian author, is known for her contributions to literature that explores social and cultural issues through compelling narratives. Born on July 27, 1923, in Amritsar, Punjab, Mehta led a remarkable life filled with literary accomplishments, awards, and recognition. Mehta's early years were marked by a strong passion for writing and storytelling. She completed her education at Punjab University, where she developed her literary skills and honed her talent. Mehta's literary career took off when she published her debut novel, *Inside the Haveli*, in 1977. The novel garnered critical acclaim for its insightful portrayal of women's lives in traditional Indian households. One of Mehta's notable achievements was her ability to shed light on the experiences and struggles of women in Indian society. Her writing often delved into the complexities of gender roles, the challenges faced by women in patriarchal systems, and the societal expectations imposed on them. Mehta's works were praised for their sensitive portrayal of these issues, offering readers a deep understanding of the lives of Indian women. The present paper is an attempt to explore the lives of servants, maid servants, widows and other women of influence in the haveli how these women have to face many problems due to patriarchal society. Widows are not allowed to remarry and they had to live a very simple life devoid of worldly pleasures. Maid-servants are discriminated and they have no time to take rest. Even the newly-wed mistress, Geeta is also not spared from the age-old traditions of the haveli and whenever she breaks the rule, she is rebuked by others.

Keywords: Purdah, tradition, women, Rama Mehta, *Inside the Haveli*, patriarchy, marginalisation, suppression, gender discrimination, status quo, traditions, maids, widows.

Throughout history, the human race has adhered to a tradition of marginalizing individuals based on their culture, gender, caste, or the color of their skin. This marginalization often leads to social and political injustices. In India, women and lower caste communities have endured severe oppression solely due to their gender or caste, all in the name of preserving Eastern culture. They have been stripped not only of their civil rights but also their basic human rights. It is natural for those who have suffered unjust treatment for generations to harbor resentment towards the system responsible for their oppression. However, Rama Mehta, in her novel *Inside the Haveli* published in 1977, presents an alternative perspective. Mehta portrays marginalized women in her novel but does not reject the inherent social values of Indian culture. Through her female characters, she expresses her belief in upholding these values, which she deeply respects. Her characters challenge certain unjust traditions and take some radical actions, but they remain within certain boundaries. The novelist punishes those who exceed these limits. Thus, Mehta represents the voice of the

marginalized while simultaneously upholding the spirit of Indian society. She does not seek to challenge the entire culture; instead, she aims to change the attitudes and mindsets of the people in her novel. Mehta successfully demonstrates that women, despite being marginalized by society, can bring about reforms without resorting to rebellion. She shows that societal transformation can be achieved while maintaining inner peace and harmony.

In her novel, Mehta delves meticulously into the hidden corners of the Indian woman's private domestic world. Drawing from her first-hand experiences, she authentically portrays the lives of women within the havelis of Udaipur. Mehta herself resided in one of these havelis and observed life with great attention to detail. Being an outsider to the haveli traditions of Udaipur, much like her protagonist Geeta, Mehta had to immerse herself "inside" the haveli both literally, in her vivid descriptions of the physical space, and metaphorically, by delving into the lives of secluded women. This required her to create a novel that blended elements of sociology and autobiographical reflections. It was an extraordinary act of intellectual "retrogression" as she willingly stepped back from the "modern" world of liberated, educated Indians to explore the inner sanctum of veiled, segregated, and conservative Rajput women. Geeta, the protagonist of *Inside the Haveli*, can be seen as a reflection of Rama Mehta herself, and Geeta's experiences are woven upon the framework of Mehta's personal responses to Udaipur. Shivani Rushikesh Upadhyay writes about Geeta:

Geeta, the protagonist of *Inside the Haveli*, was a version of Rama Mehta and Geeta's experiences were fabrications upon an edifice of her own responses to Udaipur. The novel presents a process of 'unlearning' or 'disorientation' to refashion an educated girl into a model daughter-in-law. (116)

The novel portrays a process of 'unlearning' or 'disorientation' that transforms an educated girl into a model daughter-in-law. Within the story, women are depicted as normal, healthy human beings with spiritual depth and moral vision. They possess the potential to transcend worldly experiences and ultimately embody the true essence of eternal India. The novel *Inside the Haveli* is undoubtedly has mainly women characters. Both the central and peripheral characters are predominantly female, and the story unfolds entirely from a woman's perspective.

In the world depicted in *Inside the Haveli*, women's roles are clearly defined. They constantly veil their faces and rarely leave the haveli. They are bound by an unwritten yet rigid rule that young daughters-in-law must be docile, obedient, and remain silent unless spoken to. Expressing opinions is not expected of them. They unquestioningly follow the instructions of the older women, especially the mother-in-law and senior maids who hold privileged positions. As Shrinivas Iyengar aptly observes, "Within the haveli, all is tradition-bound, and while this means strength and security, it also means isolation and stagnation" (Iyengar 752). The haveli traditions are faithfully followed from one generation to another, sometimes resulting in oppression, suffocation, and inherent restrictions. Women bear the major responsibility of meticulously upholding these traditions and are considered the custodians of cultural practices. These traditions tightly envelop women, leaving little room for their own personal space.

All these old women shared a common past; ...They had confidence born out of hundreds of years of unbroken tradition. They never faltered or hesitated. If ever in doubt, they consulted the astrologer. Life, with all its suffering, was never unbearable. They shared each other's joys and wept together in sorrow. They were strong and even ruthless when it came to upholding family customs and ties. Tradition was like a fortress protecting them from the outside world, giving them security and a sense of superiority. (114)

Women serve as the litmus test for traditions within the haveli. They have to face every problem created by the patriarchal society. As Santosh Gupta writes:

In this preservation of tradition, the women, as observed by Geeta, play a dominant role. They effectively and practically implement what the men decide, desire, or expect of them. Observing and preserving traditions and rituals become the goal of their lives, and they find happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment through it. (225)

In Udaipur, girls are denied education due to fears that their education might disrupt family harmony by fostering personal ambitions and goals. Early marriage, dowry, purdah, and the joint family system serve as obstacles to girls' education. Girls are denied education because it encourages critical thinking and potential rebellion, which threatens family and societal harmony, as well as male authority. However, the silent, subtle, and gradual transformation within the haveli proves that an educated woman can play a significant role in modernizing sections of society where women are still bound by superstition and rigid conventions.

The novel portrays a host of female characters in a realistic manner, bringing them to life with flesh and blood. Each character is unique and not merely a stereotype, representing the true essence of Indian ethos. They reflect the culture of India in general and Rajasthan in particular. These women bear the weight of tradition and act as agents of change. Among them are child-brides, child-mothers, and child-widows who carry the burdens of society's inheritance. They cling to conventions while allowing modernity to seep in. A. G. Khan writes:

In this process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any, she induces her mother-in-law with a feeling of warmth towards modernity. (Khan 44)

This is an excellent demonstration of the Indian socio-cultural values upheld by the servant community. They advise the masters and play important part in taking any decision. They influence the behavior of the masters. They observe the rules and regulations of the haveli strictly and live in great discipline. They maintain the dignity of their haveli. Even men also follow the rules:

Her husband was also hardly seen during the day: The men including her husband seemed to disappear as soon as it was daylight. The whole day they were away in their offices or busy in their section[s] of the house. (Mehta 19)

These servants give great respect to their masters and get one in return. Pari is treated with due deference not only by the other maids but also by the masters. Geeta and other young brides seek her guidance. When Geeta puts her first step on the Udaipur railway station without veil, pari rebukes her and she immediately pulls Geeta's sari on her face, "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'" (Mehta 17).

The master depends on Pari for some household information. She remembers the gifts given by the havelis to the family members of her haveli on different occasions. When similar occasions take place in the other havelis, she is consulted for the gifts to be given to them. These maids are very sensitive. They all feel guilty for Lakshmi's predicament. They think themselves responsible for her escape. They eagerly wait for her to return to the haveli. They take care of her daughter Sita. They give her motherly affection. They sit late in night to stitch blouses and skirts for Sita without caring for their sore eyes. They want to help Gangaram, Sita's father, economize the occasion of Sita's marriage. They understand the gravity and complexity of the situation and behave or react accordingly. In the presence of Kanawar Sa or Ajay, they never chatter. They never confront angry Kanwarani Sa. They disperse quietly when she taunts them about Sita's first experience of the school. When Geeta is furious about the proposal for Vijay, none of them dare to go to her. They

know that their young mistress will not stand any nonsense from them. These servants, with their unswerving loyalty, are truly the backbone of haveli life. .

At the end of the novel, we witness their united stride. Geeta and Kanwarani Sa strive to maintain harmony by preserving what they have and accepting what comes their way. Similar to the novels of Dickens, Rama Mehta's work possesses the potential to instigate social reform and shape public opinion. The role of women is pre-defined by men and society, confining them to an idealized position that assigns them duties and responsibilities but denies them rights, respect, and freedom. The most striking revelation is that women themselves often fail to recognize the injustices inflicted upon them. Conditioned to accept everything without protest, they seldom contemplate their entitlement to rights and freedom as human beings. Rama Mehta endeavors to awaken them from their prolonged slumber and foster a progressive outlook on life. Dr Bijender Singh writes that ...women have one or the other problem in patriarchal society and they are striving hard to come out of the stifling and suffocating environment but only a few of them resort agitation and resistance and to some extent enjoy liberty while other live life like silent-sufferers in inertia and shed tears and nobody comes forward to wipe out their tears. Thus, they live a sub-human life in rigid and wobbly circumstances. (Singh 10)

Rama Mehta portrays a diverse array of servant characters, particularly the maid servants, with great finesse. They possess their own distinct identities and individualities. These characters are afforded ample space and freedom to express their thoughts and emotions. They serve as the 'chorus' of the novel, possessing comprehensive knowledge of havelis and haveli traditions. They are trained and experienced, requiring no instruction. Familiar with their duties, they diligently and sincerely follow the traditions with unwavering faith. These age-old customs provide them with security and strength, defining their place within the haveli. They do not aspire for more, finding contentment in what their masters provide. The maid servants play a significant role in Geeta's socialization. Pari, the head servant of the family, takes the lead in introducing Geeta to the intricacies of social life after her marriage. Pari faces so many problems in her life. She has no time to take rest. Even after her husband's death, she is not free from her family pressures. She shares her story of woes to Lakshmi, Sita's mother:

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)

The author grants her equal importance and respect as Kanwarani Sa. Young haveli brides, including Geeta, seek her blessings by touching her feet. These servant women exhibit unwavering devotion to their masters, willing to do anything for the haveli's sake. They safeguard the reputation of their masters and the haveli, preventing any disgrace or defamation. They work tirelessly from dawn till night without complaint while maintaining their self-respect. Geeta observes:

This kind of devotion is almost superhuman. The servants go hungry if the children haven't eaten; they go without sleep if a child has a slight headache. And yet for all this, they receive so little in return. But they are always cheerful as if they have their own secret source of happiness that no one can touch. (171)

The novel weaves a rich tapestry of interconnected relationships involving relatives, servants, friends, and neighbors. Geeta finds herself deeply entangled in these relationships, which have become integral to her identity and way of life. She realizes that open rebellion is not the solution; instead, she seeks a meaningful compromise that allows her to live with self-respect as a fully

realized individual. Kanwarani Sa, portrayed as the matriarch, holds the final authority in family matters. Despite enduring hardships under her mother-in-law's iron rule, she takes pride in her royal lineage. As a kind and considerate mother-in-law, she grants Geeta the necessary space and understanding to act upon her own convictions. Her accommodation of Geeta's modern ideas demonstrates a rare spirit. In turn, Geeta reveals her true essence by utilizing her freedom to uplift those who have fallen, dedicating her time and energy to brightening the lives of other haveli women and maids.

While Geeta seems to have adjusted to her life in the royal family after a few years of marriage, moments of crisis serve as catalysts for her self-awakening. Rather than considering escape, she embraces self-assertion and believes that a woman need not leave her marriage or family to discover her true self. The author, far from presenting patriarchy or male domination as the sole cause of women's troubles, delves into a woman's internal struggle for self-discovery and self-realization. Geeta is dissatisfied with the status quo, finding the situation suffocating at times. She alternates between surrendering and fighting back, seeking solutions to her problems while never considering abandoning relationships, disregarding traditions, or escaping her marriage. She understands that running away does not solve the underlying issues and bravely confronts and challenges them. Geeta maintains her dignity as a royal woman, not raising her voice within the family and embracing her femininity. Her resistance to outdated traditions stems from her concern for the welfare of others, ultimately bringing her self-satisfaction and recognition.

Throughout her endeavours to bring change to the haveli, Geeta receives wholehearted appreciation from her husband, Ajay. He consistently encourages her constructive actions and takes pride in her decision to send Sita to school. The novel concludes convincingly and satisfactorily, with Geeta facing numerous challenges posed by socio-cultural forces and emerging as a strong and principled woman. She asserts her individuality, utilizes her education, and embraces the freedom to work, all while understanding and accepting the importance of traditions. Geeta carries herself with dignity in her new role as the mistress of the haveli. Sumita Pal writes about this change, "The novel ends with Geeta's taking over (Pal 101).

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