

GENDER AND CULTURE IN RAMA MEHTA'S 'INSIDE THE HAVELI'

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ABSTRACT

The image of the new women and her quest and struggle for identity of her own is emerging theme in the Indian English Novel. The male domination in a woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society and the consequent suppression of the woman to a secondary position seem to have prompted Indian women writers to take up the cause of women.

This paper concentrates on Gender and Culture in Rama Mehta's 'Inside the Haveli'. The major incidents in the novel are taken into account to support the study. The concept of purdha is central to the theme of the Novel. Patriarchal family system is presented in the novel. The society itself, in those days when Rama Mehta has written the novel 'Inside the Haveli', was passing through the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. In such a transactional period woman can play an important role as an agent of change. This is depicted in Rama Mehta's Novel 'Inside the Haveli', where the Haveli becomes a symbol of tradition, "Which was like a fortress protecting them from the outside world, giving them security and a sense of superiority".

Rama Mehta born in Nainital in 1923 was a well-known sociologist. She made several studies of educated Indian women who are caught between tradition and modernity. She also worked as a lecturer and plunged into writing with her novel "Inside the Haveli". She also wrote non-fiction research works such as divorced woman and from purdah to modernity. Her other two novels are Ramu: A story of India (1966) and The life of Keshav: A Family story from India (1969).

KEYWORDS: Gender, Culture, Tradition, Modernity

WORDS MEANING: Haveli- Mansion, Purdha-Vail, Binji- Young Married Women

INTRODUCTION

Family is the smallest unit of society where all the members share their joys, sorrows and anxieties of life. Familial relations are important as they help us interact with the wider social world. The relationships between family members often serve as the central focus in the work of literature in particular, many writers – including women- place great significance on the dynamics of human relationships for relations often present complex, provocative models of interaction.

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Rama Mehta occupies a significant place among the cotemporary women novelist. The cultural family values imbued in her personality are the only weapon to bring change in the family atmosphere. Mehta has succeeded in creating faithful canvas of a women centered world in the haveli, where women are honoured as guardians of the sanctity of the ancient traditions and family pride.

The writer's depiction of life in purdah can be seen as a result of her research as a sociologist. She has her own original sense of understanding and adjusting to the tradition observed in the Haveli. May be she wanted to remove certain misunderstanding regarding purdah system. In the novel she attempts to rationalize the purdah system on the ground that it provided security and honour to women living in the haveli.

Rama Mehta's writing is concerned with the inner world of a modern educated, young woman who is successful in establishing her own identity in a male – dominated and tradition bound society. She attempts to give an honest portrayal of the suffering, disappointments and frustrations of her protagonist 'Geeta'. Rama Mehta and Geeta the protagonist of the novel, have a great deal in common. The protagonist like the novelist has been a lively, open-minded, western educated girl. After her education at Nainital and St Stephen's College, Delhi she has been selected to the Indian Foreign Service. She sacrifices her prestigious career, when she marries to Shree Jagat Mehta, a fellow IFS officer. She lives at her husband's native place, Udaipur. Their house which is in-fact a mansion is known by the name "Jeevan Nivas", where she has been looked after by two maids Pari and Duppa. Mehta has given birth to a daughter and the child has been named Vijay. All the above is reflected in the story of Geeta, who is educated and full of life. She is married to a conservative and traditional family of Udaipur.

Initially Geeta is baffled in the tradition bound Haveli atmosphere. She lives like a meek and yielding creature; saying all the time that she has nothing to worry here. She takes pride in such suffering. Centuries of tradition have made her so.

The flames lit her face but her eyes were remote as if she was somewhere else and there was weariness in her expression (p88). Bhasin has rightly observed,

'Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behavior patterns, roles responsibilities, rights unlike sex which is biological, the gender identities of

women and men are psychologically and socially- which means historically and culturally determined'.

Geeta's married life in the haveli is such that she is hardly left with any choice. She recognizes her limitations as a daughter-in-law of the Haveli. The amiable attitude of her in-laws forces her to merge in the traditional atmosphere of the Haveli. When Ajay is offered a job in Delhi University his mother tells Geeta not to think of old people or the Haveli, but to think of their own happiness. She tells:

"I want to tell you that Bapu (Ajay) should not think of us this time. We are old and our work in the world is over but you both are young and the future is open to you. I am a mother, I want to see my children happy and fulfilled".

Days pass by and Vijay is now a school going Girl. Geeta decides to send Sita, the daughter of maid Laxmi to school. Sita is a motherless Girl and exactly of Vijay's age. Geeta is supported by her father-in-law lest other servants and her mother-in-law criticizes her for this decision.

The culture of the Haveli is such that it requires total submission to its rule and conventions and there women are kept enclosed within the huge walls of the haveli. In the words of Rama Mehta, "the educated women are less keen to uphold older values that they find repressive, harsh and meaningless".

In spite of all criticism Geeta is successful in sending Sita to school. Her next venture is to start classes for the maid and their children. She is praised and supported by the males in the Haveli.

'You did the right thing', I am proud of you. It is time for new idea to enter the Haveli says Ajay Singh with conviction (137) but her mother-in-law is not happy and is doubtful about Geeta's success in running the classes. She tells Pari:

"Let Binji amuse herself. Her enthusiasm won't last long; she will soon get tired of the women. Then let's see what she starts next".

Thus we observe that women bound in various relationships, they have grasped the importance of moving beyond their prescribed roles, and when they see in Men similar urge to be bound to their roles, they can only be compassionate, not condemning. Thus viewed, the patriarchy seems not merely human but amenable too despite the harsh realities the women themselves have experienced.

Geeta suffers mental turbulence. She thinks of her roots her traditions in the haveli and her modern upbringing. Ultimately she finds meaning in her family life. She feels that family bonds are essential ingredients of one's being. When Nandu and Manji protested the classes of Geeta, her mother-in-law silences them both. Though she disapproves of her classes, she still defends Geeta before others.

This incident forces her to think that she is the future custodian of family traditions. She declares, "I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The Haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds? Where else in the world I get this kind of Love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must love and respect this ancient house." (170).

As Beauvoir observes,

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.

This indicates that in the tradition bound patriarchal Indian Community, a woman has to accept and practice the principles that the community lays down.

The conflict between tradition and modernity over the marriage of Vijay comes to a climax in the last section of the novel. Geeta's eldest daughter is just thirteen years old; a proposal is given by Daulat Singh's wife for her marriage with her grandson Vir Singh. Geeta did not agree but her father-in-laws emotional appeal calms her. She has realised the wisdom of words but she still feels uneasy. Finally her father-in-laws illness makes it clear to her that she likes the alliance.

Geeta accepts Vir Singh's proposal for Vijay for two reasons. First she realizes that all mothers start looking for suitable matches for their daughters early enough. Secondly her trust in her father-in-laws words assuring her the suitability and Vijay's marriage will not take place before the completion of her Education.

CONCLUSIONS

Rama Mehta has skillfully dealt with culture in the novel *The Protagonist*. Geeta did not feel anything wrong in the social custom. The ethos of the novel is harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas of modernity and culture. The novel also gives message to the youth what we should retain of the past and what we should adopt from the present situation. If we are properly educated, culture and traditions does not come in the way of our personal freedom and individuality.

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