



The Value-orientation of the Marginalized: Women and Servants in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

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It has been the tradition of the human race since ages to marginalize people on the bases of their culture, gender, caste, colour of the skin etc. This kind of marginalization results in social and sometimes political injustice. This is the case with the Indian women and some of the lower caste communities serving the higher ones. They have been suppressed beyond limits, for no reason other than their being women or taking birth in a particular caste, in the name of the eastern culture since long. They are deprived of not only civil rights but also human rights.

Now, who, on the earth, displays pride for the culture that deprives and the society that oppresses? Who can think of conserving the human values of a civilization that denies some of the basic rights to a whole class just because of its caste or gender? It is very human to hate the agency that has been unjust to one since ages. But Rama Mehta, in her only novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977), presents an alternative point of view.

She depicts the marginalized women but does not defy the social values inherent to the Indian culture. Rather, through a bunch of female characters, she shows her conviction in the maintenance of these values for which she has deep respect. Her characters oppose some unjust traditions and take some radical actions; but they do not cross their limits. The one who goes beyond the boundaries is punished by the novelist. Thus, she represents the voice of the marginalized simultaneously upholding the spirit of the Indian society. She does not challenge the culture; she changes the attitude and mindset of the people in her novel. She has successfully demonstrated that women, though marginalized by the society, can bring reforms without being rebellious. Transformation of society can be brought while remaining at peace with oneself and maintaining harmony in the society.

The novelist painstakingly probes into the dark recesses which make up the Indian woman's private domestic world. She wrote the novel with the authenticity of the first hand information. She herself lived in one of the Udaipur havelis and observed life very minutely. She was also 'an outsider' to the haveli traditions of Udaipur like her protagonist Geeta. To situate herself 'inside' the haveli, literally in the depictions of picturesque physical space and metaphorically, in the midst of the women who led secluded lives, she had to

devise a novel which turned out part sociology, part a mashing autobiography. Hers was an unusual act of intellectual 'retrogression' as she willingly stepped back over the threshold from the 'modern' world of emancipated, educated Indians to tread the interior space of veiled, segregated, conservative Rajput women folk. 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'.

In this novel, the woman is presented as a normal, healthy human being with a spiritual depth and a moral vision. She has a potential that helps her transcend worldly experiences enabling her eventually to emerge as a true image of eternal India. As described on the blurb of the novel, *Inside the Haveli* is considered to be "a modern classic about an independent young woman's struggle to hold on to her identity in a traditional world." This is truly a woman's novel. The central as well as the peripheral characters are women. The story is entirely told from a woman's point of view.

In the world of *Inside The Haveli*, the role of women is sharply defined. Their faces are veiled all the time. They seldom leave the haveli. They are subjected to the unwritten but rigid rule that young daughters-in-law must be docile and obedient, silent unless spoken to. They are never expected to voice an opinion. They must unquestioningly follow every instruction of the older women, particularly the mother-in-law and even privileged senior maids. Shrinivas Iyengar rightly observes, "Within the haveli, all is tradition-bound, and while this means strength and security, it also means isolation and stagnation." (*Indian Writing in English* 752)

The haveli traditions are unquestioningly followed by all, generation to generation. They are sometimes oppressive, suffocating and restrictive by nature. The major responsibility of observing these traditions meticulously is carried out unsayingly by women. They are called the custodians of traditions. These traditions envelop women so tightly that hardly any space is left for them. "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 are treated as the testing ground for traditions. Gupta writes:

"In this preservation of tradition the women, Geeta observes, play a dominant role for they take up the burden of implementing effectively and practically what the men folk decide, desire or expect of them. Observing and preserving traditions and the rituals become the goal of their lives, and they attain happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment through it." (Dhawan, *Indian Women Novelists* 225)

In Udaipur, girls are not sent to school. People are afraid of marrying educated girls. "Families feared that educated women would threaten the harmony of family life by developing personal ambitions and goals." (Mehta, *Western Educated Hindu Woman* 19) Early marriage, dowry, purdah and joint family system are the hurdles in the way of a girl's education. Girls are denied education as it makes them think and revolt. It may give 'wrong ideas' to them. It may arouse their sense of individuality. And this would threaten the harmony of the family/society and more than that, the authority of men. But the silent, subtle and gradual

transformation in the haveli proves that an educated woman can play a significant role in the modernization of those sections of the society wherein women still live under superstition and rigid conventions.

In this novel, a host of female characters are portrayed in such a manner that they look and sound real. They are made of flesh and blood. They all are individuals and not types. They present the actual Indian ethos. They reveal the culture of India in general and of Rajasthan in particular. They are the bearers of tradition and they are the agents of change. There are child-brides, child-mothers and child-widows carrying the inheritance of the society. They cling to their conventions and they also allow modernity to prevail.

One of the striking facts of the novel is that all the female characters are given sufficient freedom of behaviour within their boundaries. They are given due respect. They are consulted for family matters. We find no interference from the men in the activities of the female courtyard. Geeta is shown creating a room (individuality/ space) of her own inside the haveli (tradition-bound society).

The characters are mild. They do get angry but they do not use harsh words. There is always decency, decorum and dignity in their behaviour. They approve and also disapprove, but politely. They agree and disagree too, but modestly. They like and also dislike, but humbly. They do not show any aggressiveness. They live in great discipline.

Rama Mehta's feminism is unique and uniquely expressed in her novel. She has no bias for them. She has her own way of looking at the issue of gender relationship. She does not fight for the women's cause. She does not glorify women at the cost of men. She does not depict men with any derogatory sense. She never underestimates neglects or discourages any male character. On the contrary, she shows high regards towards Sangram Singhji, Bhagwt Singhji and Ajay.

Inside the Haveli is a world of women delineated with all its complexities. Though Geeta, the daughter-in-law, is the protagonist, the role of Kanwarani Sa, the mother-in-law, is not less important. Both are extremes: Geeta being modernity embodied while Kanwarani Sa being tradition personified. The most striking thing about Rama Mehta's art is that, Geeta, through her education, has the potential of internalizing traditions and Kanwarani Sa, through her experience, has the potential of accepting modernity. As their relationship begins, both start walking towards each other gradually, gently without hurting each other. 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." (Bhatnagar, *Feminist English Literature* 44) At the end of the novel, we can see them walking together. In order to maintain harmony, Geeta and Kanwarani Sa try to preserve what is with them and accept what comes to them.

Like Dickens' novels, Rama Mehta's novel has the potential of bringing about social reformation and creating public opinion. The role of a woman is predefined by men or society. Her idealized role gives her duty and responsibility but no right, respect or freedom. The most striking fact is that women do not even notice the injustice done to them. They are conditioned to accept everything without any protest. They never think of the rights or freedom they are actually entitled to as a human being. Rama Mehta tries to wake them up from their age-long sleep and have a progressive point of view in life.

Contrary to their social status, the marginalized species in the novel have been given convictions. A few examples are: (1) An uneducated traditional mother chooses an educated girl for her only son and gives her sufficient freedom within the haveli. (2) The most conventional and orthodox servant Pari suggests for the

celebration of the birth of a girl-child. (3) Vijay's birth and Bhabha Sa's death are described elaborately. (4) Vikram's birth and Sangram Singhji's death are only reported briefly.

Rama Mehta has portrayed a galaxy of servant characters. Her servant-characters, especially the maid servants, are beautifully drawn. They have their own identity and individuality. They are given sufficient space and freedom to express their mind and heart. They serve the purpose of 'chorus' in the novel.

The maid servants know all about the havelis and the haveli traditions. They are trained and experienced. They are not required to be instructed. They know their work and do it properly and sincerely. They follow the traditions with religious faith. These age-old traditions give them security and strength. They know their place in the haveli. They do not aspire for more. They are happy and content to receive what the masters give.

They play a major role in the socialization of Geeta. In fact, Pari, the head servant of the family, initiates Geeta in the process of socialization after her marriage. She is given equal importance and respect as that of Kanwarani Sa by the author. Young haveli brides including Geeta touch her feet to seek her blessings.

These servant women are highly devoted to their masters. They do anything for their masters and for the haveli. They never let the name of their master or their haveli down. They never allow anyone to disgrace the haveli or defame the family. They work from dawn till night but never complain. They also maintain their own 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 get 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) 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. They authoritatively scold the young masters for not behaving properly

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. 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 much 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.

The novel creates a teeming world of relatives, servants, friends, neighbours inextricably knit together. Enmeshed in these relationships which have become an integral part of her identity and way of life, Geeta cannot resort to open revolt; what is required is a meaningful negotiated compromise, a re-alignment of the existing parameters of her live which permits her to live with self-respect as full, articulate human being.

Kanwarani Sa is presented as the 'matriarch'. She is considered to be the final authority as far as the family matters are concerned. Her past is glorious. Though she has suffered a lot under the iron rule of her mother-in-law, she is proud to be a part of the royal tradition. She is a kind and considerate mother-in-law. She gives space to Geeta. Her deep understanding imparts Geeta the power to act. She demonstrates rare spirit by accommodating Geeta's modern ideas. Geeta also reveals her true spirit in taking advantage of her freedom for the upliftment of the fallen. She utilizes her time and energy in brightening the lives of Sita, Ravi and many other haveli women and maids.

Geeta seems to have adjusted in the royal family after a few years of her marriage. But when the moments of crisis come, they bring self-awakening for her. The crisis makes her think of self-assertion. She does not think of any escape. The novelist firmly believes and demonstrates that a woman need not escape her marriage and family in order to find her true self. Respecting the traditional values of the family and convincing her parents-in-law, she creates space for herself. Her awakening lets the air of modernity enter the haveli.

Though a woman, the novelist is least interested in presenting patriarchy or male-domination as the only cause of the troubles of women. She does not think that marriage and human relationships are futile or they hinder the growth of a woman. She is interested in showing a woman's inner struggle to find and establish herself.

Geeta is not satisfied with their present existence. She finds the situation suffocating. She sometimes surrenders and some other time fights back the situation. She has no ready solutions for her problems. Therefore she tries hard to find them. But during her earnest efforts for creating a space for herself, she never thinks of leaving all the relationships, forgetting all the traditions or escaping the marriage. She clearly knows that running away from the situation is not a solution. She faces the situation bravely and fights it back honestly.

Geeta does not raise her voice in the family. She never fights her womanhood. She bears a dignified code of conduct as a royal woman. She is very much feminine. She resists the old traditions not for her own sake but for the welfare of the others. Of course, she gets self-satisfaction and thereby, self-recognition in the process. When Geeta tries to bring changes in the haveli, Ajay appreciates her efforts whole-heartedly. He always encourages her for doing constructive activities. The decision of sending Sita to school makes Ajay feel proud of Geeta.

The end of the novel is convincing and satisfactory. Geeta faces a number of challenges raised by the socio-cultural forces and emerges as a woman of strength and character. She asserts her individuality; utilizes her education; takes advantage of the freedom of work. She accepts the traditions after understanding their importance. She carries her new role as the mistress of the haveli with dignity. Through the character of Geeta, Rama Mehta wants to suggest that a woman needs not deny or ignore familial bonds or disobey her elders or run away from all the responsibilities in order to assert herself. It is not at all necessary to earn money or to exhibit the power to prove one's worth. A woman can make her existence meaningful without

any loud cries. She needs not cross the threshold or step out of the milieu. Freedom of thought and work is the only point where the search for one's identity ends at.

In India, most of us find it difficult to tune into the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. Most of the women are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community. The emphasis on family and community in Indian society has important implications for feminism in India. Here, family relations and social relations matter the most women. The other implication of the family-centeredness of Indian culture is that it affects the way in which conflicts are handled. Indian culture places greater value on accommodation and compromise, as opposed to confrontation and categorical choice. Worth of familial relationships and importance of reconciliation is clearly displayed in the final choice made by Geeta. She shows that actual freedom lies in showing the courage to have clear thinking and the ability to demonstrate the thoughts in action.

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