

## Review Article

# Modernity or Tradition –A Woman’s Dilemma: A Study in Rama Mehta’s *Inside The Haveli*

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### OVERVIEW

Among a score of excellent women writers of Indo-English fiction, such as Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Geta Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale and others, Rama Mehta holds a unique place on account of her deep insight into the lives, life style, pangs and pride, tears, fears and loyalty towards the family and community tradition of the Rajput women of Mewar. They cling to tradition and purdah on one hand and yet compromise with change and modernity on the other. The novel traces the actualization of a Bombay-educated modern woman, Geeta into the Haveli traditions and gradual compromise with the institutions of purdah, child-marriage and female education. The way Geeta Mehta has minutely described the inside life of the Udaipur havelis, leaves the reader in real sense of awe and revelation.

The novel is divided into three sections. While the first two sections have nine chapters each, the third section is spread over to eleven chapters. Right at the beginning we have a vivid description of Udaipur, its topography, surroundings, down-town lanes, palaces and havelis. (p. 1 - 4)

Further, in the next chapters, we are introduced to the three ladies, Bhabha Sa, Kunwaraniji and Geeta, and we as well get to know how one generation passes on the mantle of the haveli’s tradition to the next one. Together with it, the novel also gives position, loyalty and orthodox feelings of the haveli maids. Thus, we notice how Pariji, Ganga, Dhapu and other maids are proud of the honour and legacy of the havelis. This is what Rama Mehta says about Pariji:

Pari was only a maid servant in the haveli like the other eight, but with her tact, hard work and devoted service for forty-five years, she had established a special place for herself in the family. (p. 6)

As a matter of fact, the haveli stands as a shelter home for the destitute poor folk.

Pari was her father’s favourite child. He did not want to see her suffer from hunger and then slowly wither away like the other three. So he decided to give her away. In this he was following a common practice of feudal Rajasthan where villagers in desperate circumstances gave their sons and daughters to the care of aristocratic families. (p.6)

Chapter IV of the first section recapitulates Geeta’s memories of her marriage with Ajay, the only son of Bhagwat Singhji and the heir of Jeevan Niwas. Ajay was a science professor. It was presumed that he would soon shift to Delhi University. So, Geeta the Bombay girl of modern education and culture had hoped that their sojourn at Udaipur would be short. But as soon as she reaches Udaipur, Pari, the chief maid of the haveli tells her

In Udaipur, we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face. (p. 10)

She also comes to know that she is not to step out the bounds of the Zenana section of the haveli. Once she happens to stroll into the audience hall. She looks with awe at all the gilt-framed portraits of her husband’s forefathers:

Looking at the strong determined faces, Geeta had thought with pride these must have been the kind of men who had fought and won battles against the Moghuls. Just as she took a step backward to get a better view of the handsome faces, a cold hand touched her shoulder. (p. 17)

But soon Pari appears and cautions her:

What are you doing here all alone, Binniji? I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways. In this section of the havelis women come only when properly escorted. Pari's tone was severe. What would your father-in-law think if he saw you with your face uncovered? Binniji, daughter-in-law of this haveli do not behave like this. (p. 17)

Geeta is a little embarrassed. The festivities and feasts of Vijay's birth keep her busy for sometime. But Geeta tried to take comfort in the hope that her stay in Udaipur was temporary. Her husband was not quite satisfied with the university. They had often discussed the idea of going to Delhi. Geeta felt better as she dwelt on the prospect of leaving the havelis. (p. 24)

Things, however continue to be tough for her. Everybody repeatedly reminds her of the purdah system. Thus, Kanwaraniji, her mother-in-law tells her:

Binniji, she said gently but firmly, 'keep your face covered; by now you should be able to move around without uncovering your face.' Then, after a brief pause, as if to give emphasis to her words, she said, 'Do not talk too much to your young cousins-in-law, it's not becoming. You know, the women are critical.. I want to show them that even an educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my only son. Besides, I am getting old now and soon you will have to take over. (p. 26)

Rama Mehta has taken up some other issues related to the ways of the haveli-life. The story of Lakshmi points out that anybody that goes away from the caring shelter of the havelis, meets disaster and doom. Lakshmi is a maid servant. She gives birth to a daughter, Sita nearly at the same time when Vijay is born to Geeta. Heera Lal, the Car driver tries to lure Lakshmi with saree and sweets which she spurns. Thus, she speaks to herself:

Before anyone gets up. I will go up and throw the halwa to the dogs. Then I will tell the mistress what a rascal, a thief, she has in the haveli—a man who will take the honour of women—who does he take me to be? A cheap street woman, that he throws presents at me. I will show them the blouse and the sari and I will see that he is dismissed. (p. 54)

But Gangaram, her husband calls her a street woman, "she is worse than a street woman". (p. 58) and as he raises his hand upon Lakshmi, Kanwaranji scolds him, saying:

Leave my maid along. Get out of here. Who are you to talk to her in this fashion in front of me? I have brought her up. How dare you raise your hand in my presence.? (p. 58)

Later, she tells Pari:After all, she is still only a child. It is natural for her to get tempted. It is not her fault. Men are men. They take advantage of the innocent. (p. 59)

However, Lakshmi feels ashamed and frustrated and in deep despair runs away from the haveli. Thus, she dissipates herself into a lost woman.

The Haveli maids take care of Lakshmi's daughter, Sita. She becomes a playmate of Vijay, Geeta's daughter and the darling child of the haveli. But Champa and other maids constantly remind her of her real position in the haveli. Thus, Champa plainly tells her:

Learn to clean and sweet or even the mistress will have no use for you. Just because Vijay Bai Saheb plays with you, don't imagine you are her equal. (p. 75)

However, Geeta has her own plans. She declares that like Vijay, Sita will also go to school. Vijay goes to school and you do not object. why shouldn't Sita? (p. 79) She quips. But the head maid, Pari contradicts her, explaining that there is a difference between the two girls:

She must be protected from the outside world. Binniji, you do not yet know Udaipur and its customs. Sita has to marry. Leave her to us, the servants. We know what is best for her. (p. 79)

She further adds:

Binniji, a girl who has to live in the village must be sturdy. She cannot be pampered. Her limbs must be strong to pull water from the well, to plough the fields, collect the cow dung. As it is, Sita is lazy. You send her to school and she will begin to think she is a little lady. (p. 80)

Bhagwat Singhji is a liberal and forward looking person. He tells Pari that education is a good thing and times are changing. After all, it is better to be in school than to play in streets, he further says. Thus, Rama Mehta explains how the feudal havelis of Mewar are stirring for change. This is clear from Geeta's suggestion that she should run a school for the maids children at the havelis itself. Bua Sa, Manji appreciates it, and tells her, "I am glad you are bringing new ideas into the havelis. It is no good living in the past, for the sake of our children, we must look to the future." (p. 94) In this way, Geeta begins to feel that a wind of change towards modernity has started blowing at the haveli. Now she is no more irked

with the idea that she has been trapped in a purdah-ridden backward world. Rather, a new truth is dawned upon her mind and the writer says, instead of feeling desperately trapped, there was a strange peace within her." (p. 113) And later she confesses :

'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 would I get this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house.' (p. 137)

Where else in the world could children be enveloped in such affection? 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. (p. 137)

However, the strings of tradition and traditional views are hard to break and the older generation is never quick to give way. This is clear from Kanwaraniji's opposition to Geeta's school at the haveli. She tells Pari, "I can already predict that these classes will bring a bad name to the havelis.(p. 122) Opposition to Geeta's classes comes from other havelis as well. For example, Nandu tells Manji and Kanta Bai Sa;

There may be peace in your haveli, Hukkum, but there is confusion in ours,' replied Nandu sharply. If you don't believe me ask Manji and Kanta Bai Sa; the young maids are not to be seen in the mornings at all. How much can my old maid do? Her daughters used to sweep the haveli; they washed the clothes, now they disappear for the whole morning. They come here and waste their time listening to stories that Binniji tells them. (p. 133)

In spite of all resistance, Geeta continues to hold her classes. Bhagwat Singhji as well encourages her, providing two sewing machines for the tailoring sessions of the girls. Geeta is satisfied. She realizes that she too has changed. "She had seen the value of kinship ties and wanted to preserve the ancestral dignity of the havelis". (p. 142) She also comes to understand that for poor girls education alone is not enough. Therefore, she agrees with Kanwaraniji that she should not insist upon Sita's education even after her marriage. The constraints of tradition and social realities of life bring her round to her mother-in-law's argument. Kanwaraniji tells her :

Binniji, you have made Sita's life. We have all been proved wrong. But now we must accept their condition. Marriage is the only security for women. It is you who

have made it possible for her to be married into a family with land, with a well, a brick house and bullocks. Don't insist further. (p. 150)

In this way, on one hand, the haveli is slowly changing to modernity while the protagonist is as well understanding the value and logic of tradition. Even Pari too is full of admiration for Geeta's efforts to educate the poor girls. Thus says,

Whatever anyone may say, Binniji has changed the lives of these girls, Hukkum; most of them now can read and write; they can get work, they don't have to depend on the havelis, said Pari. (p. 152)

However, Geeta is completely irreconciled to the question of child-marriage. She would not listen to anybody, not even to Kanwaraniji as well as her husband on the proposal of Vijay's marriage with Vir Singhji, the son of a very wealthy feudal lord of Udaipur. She plainly speaks out her mind to her husband, Ajay Singh.

I have put up with enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend any more. I won't ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who will marry when she is still a child. I know exactly how these things work in this place. First, they will only want an engagement and no sooner has that been done, they'll start talking about marriage. You are all a bunch of hypocrites. (p. 164 – 165)

Well, Ajay, let me tell you that I don't care what family Vir Singh comes from or how much money he has buried in the ground. I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college. Who knows what he will be like when he is a man? (p. 165)

Later, she repeats her determination before Dhapu, a haveli maid;

My daughter's marriage is my concern, I will never agree to Vijay's engagement like this, no matter what happens. Even if it were the son of the Maharana of Udaipur, I wouldn't agree,'... (p. 171)

But by and by Geeta's mind undergoes a change. She is reminded of Bhagwat Singhji's wise counsel. He had told her; I like Vir Singh; he is a good boy and not spoiled. A girl sooner or later has to get married.' (p. 201)

Self analysis and introspection convinces her of the compatibility of Vijay's marriage with Vir Singh. She thinks of her own marriage, which was an arranged one. "Her parents had chosen the right man for her. She was happy. She had not gone on bigger studies." (p. 201) Thus the value of tradition is dawned upon her. She agrees to the proposal of Vijay's marriage. Meanwhile,

the sudden death of Bhagwat Singhji changes the whole situation. Geeta has to assume the role and responsibility of the mistress of the haveli.

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