

## Quest for Identity in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

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**Abstract.** Quest for Identity forms the central concept for almost all the contemporary literature as well as the literature written from a feminist perspective. One or the other character is consistently in search for his or her own identity, be it in a cultural content, social content, psychological content or may be some other aspects too. The present paper is concerned with the main protagonist, Geeta's quest for her identity in Rama Mehta's Sahitya Akademi award winning novel *Inside the Haveli*. It is a fascinating novel conveying the essence and feel of a world which is fast disappearing. At the very outset the word 'Haveli' itself draws a picture in our mind of a very old fashioned traditionally-bound culture of the Raja's or Maharana's where women were supposed to live a purdah-ed life. With the dawn of the concept of a 'New Woman' there started a struggle for individuality and identity. This is to be found in Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* too where Geeta suffers from identity crisis in a cross-cultural content. It is the presentation of a life of a young modern educated girl from Mumbai, getting married to the prince of a Haveli in Udaipur and also how she arranges to be fitted in the most orthodox family of Udaipur. It is also the study of metamorphosis brought to the haveli by her advent.

**Keywords :** Haveli; tradition; modernity; identity; new woman.

Our identity is built upon our personality, tradition, culture, our language or whatever we acquire as well as our own innate qualities; in short, the way we are born and brought up. Any sort of threat to this 'identity' forces us either to be rebellious or to accept the things as they are. This is the case with Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* where the protagonist Geeta, born and brought up in Bombay, the young independent woman struggles to maintain her post-marriage modern identity in a traditional world of the haveli of Udaipur. K. Radha comments:

The title of the novel *Inside the Haveli* is not just descriptive. It is a search or an exploration of one's own self: one's own identity which is lost in the labyrinthine tradition and customs of society. The book has its own motion; a soft stir of values, perceptions and altitudes. It covers a period of fifteen years in the life of two characters-Geeta, the heroine and the other character being the Haveli, a silent witness to an entire era. (Dhawan, 202)

As it is said that 'an art reflects an artist', the same can be studied in the context of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* itself. There is a significant resemblance

with the life of the protagonist and the author's own. Her own female 'self' interferes in the narrative. She was married into an aristocratic family of the Oswal community in the erstwhile Mewar state. The Oswals strictly followed the Purdah system. Rama Mehta has a credit of being appointed as the first woman in Indian Foreign Service and was married to Jagat Mehta, a fellow officer but was forced to resign after her marriage. Since then she resided at Udaipur, her husband's native place. Their house which is infact a mansion is known by the name *Jeevan Nivas* where she had been looked after by two maids 'Pari' and 'Duppa'. Mehta has given birth to a daughter and the child has been named 'Vijay'. All this reflects in Geeta, the focus of *Inside the Haveli*, who is an educated and vivacious girl. Malashri Lal says :

Geeta, the protagonist of *Inside the Haveli* was a version of Rama Mehta and Geeta's experiences were much of the time, fabrications upon an edifice of her own responses to Udaipur . (90)

*Inside the Haveli* is Mehta's only novel for adult readers. Srinivasa Iyengar appreciated its woven fabric as such :

*Inside the Haveli* is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction, even an authentic sociological study, and it is written with a naturalness and poise that are disarming and effective at once. The evocation of scene, character and especially of atmosphere is almost uncanny... The balance between repose and movement is well sustained, there is tension but no cheapsex, there is tension but no violence, and there is a feeling for the values and varieties.

(Iyengar, 753)

As it happens with majority of Indian girls, Geeta is married to a boy of her parents' choice at the young age of nineteen. She is hardly left with any choice. Also, before getting married she is given an advice by her mother :

Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much. (*Inside the Haveli*, 16)

Meenakshi Thapan is of the view that "women who transgress their habitual, 'assigned' socio-physical spaces run the risk of being labeled as of 'loose virtue; and are subjected to a strong censure by older member"(23). Geeta tries to be an ideal daughter but her modern views come into clash when she first lands to Udaipur. She almost gets the biggest shock of her life:

The minute she had put her foot on the platform she was immediately encircled by women singing

but their faces were covered. 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?' Geeta, bewildered, frightened managed to get in to the car without talking to the woman who followed her, singing as loud as they could...[when] Geeta had lifted her face and pulled the sari back to see. No, no, you cannot do that, 'Pari had snapped, pulling back the sari over her face. In Udaipur we keep Purdah, strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.

(*Inside the Haveli*, 17)

As soon as she reaches "home", she is further shocked by the realisation that the men and women live in different parts of the huge haveli, without any contact with each other. Indeed, life inside the haveli is governed by an impossibly rigid etiquette of do's and don'ts, and for her, as for all the other women, there is no life outside the haveli's high walls.

All these indicate the menace of Purdah system. Ideologically, purdah is the oldest form of colonization, of domination and of control. It is based on the principle of inequality and establishes itself on the dual strategy of control and exclusion. It is often talked about as modesty, *ijjat*, *laaz*, *sharam*, and is symbolic of conformity while the concept of independence, freedom and self are all relegated to the world outside it. Sociologist Indira Parikh and Pulin Garg in the article "Women's Space *Inside the Haveli*: Incarceration or Insurrection"? describes the traditional state of Purdah in India where upper-class women live mostly indoors:

They come as brides and leave only for the funeral pyre. The husband's home is their prison, their castle, and their palace. They believe, or are made to believe, or have no other choice but believe, that this is all for their good... however, within the walls of their home, within the feudal system of a large joint family, run parallel themes of exploitation, intrigue and counter- intrigue, all revolving around the control of resources through legacy and heritage. This is the only life they know as wives. (Parikh and Garg, 90).

The youthful Geeta finds herself unable to reconcile with the idea of spending the rest of her life in Purdah. But at the same time she sees no escape from this outdated way of life, for her husband is too deeply rooted in his traditions and too deeply attached to his parents to take up a job in some other city. Ajay Singh, the only son of Bhagat Singh Ji and the heir of Jeevan Niwas 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. Even the women of haveli believed, "she will never adjust, she is not one of us." (*Inside the Haveli*, 29) But as we find a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity in Geeta, she soon discovers positive aspects of veiling because "this allows her to think while others talked. To her delight, she had discovered that through her thin Muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them" (23). There was something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time.

Gradually the life in the haveli begins to have its play on Geeta. She begins to adjust herself to the new circumstances and begins to accept the codes of the haveli. Moreover, she gradually comes to realise that, inspite of their exacting demands of conformity with the family tradition, her parents-in-law are essentially warmhearted and generous, "Looking at the men below she forgot her daily irritations; She felt proud to be the young mistress of the haveli. How could she allow little discomforts to blend her to the great traditions of the family?" (40)

For all that Geeta has had no direct conversation with her husband's grandfather and father, and has lived isolated from the men. She had never spoken a word to them. Sudhir Chandra analyzing this situation comments:

Communication with the older men is minimal (if it exists at all) since they... are traditionally expected to maintain a posture of formal restraint in the presence of the newcomer... (Kakar, 63)

Bhagwat Singh Ji, her father-in-law inquires about Geeta's health via maid servants, 'How is Binniji', he asked Pari (*Inside the Haveli*, 83). Geeta hates this etiquette, this authority taboo that prevents a daughter-in-law from talking freely to her father-in-law. She is unhappy to realize that "even after seven years I am stranger to those that are mine, and I will always remain a stranger." (83) The authority taboo controls a woman's relationship not only with her father-in-law but also with her husband. Dube observes that "an Indian husband and wife are not supposed to show any special concern for each other". (Dube, 153). There is hardly any opportunity for them to meet during the day. Geeta and Ajay are no exception to this rule. Thus, neither she can enjoy freedom with her husband nor she can fondle and kiss her own child in the presence of her parents-in-law. The presence of authority is felt everywhere. Nothing is done without consulting Geeta's grandfather-in-law and father-in-law. It is around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved :

In the haveli men were regarded with awe as if they were Gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care. (*Inside the Haveli*, 21)

Being a daughter one had to learn all the domestic tasks. Education remained as secondary thing. When Geeta's daughter Vijay stood first in her class, Bhagwat Singhji's wife says, "Coming first is alright, Vijay, but you must also learn to cook and sew. Don't become like your mother" (153). At the beginning course of her journey to find a female identity, Geeta remains silent and passive. Along with the physical veiling, emotions must also be hidden. Geeta finds that although other women thrive on gossip, they never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feelings:

In the haveli no one really expressed their feelings.  
They covered their emotions in an elaborate  
exchange of formal gestures and words. Even her  
husband talked to his parents as if they were dignitaries  
with whom he could take no liberties. (32)

Rama Mehta shows gradual development in the character of Geeta. For the first time, she comes out of silence and raises her voice when she demands education for Sita, the daughter of maid Lakshmi and servant Gangaram. Geeta sat up erect as if she no longer could contain her thoughts and said with quiet authority, "Pariji, Sita must go to school" (198). But Pari opposed her at this decision. Geeta felt outraged at the maid's accusation. Her eyes flashed in challenge, but she controlled her natural impulse to answer back. Geeta's inner state to find her self-identity is described as :

...the room seemed to suffocate her, she felt trapped  
in the haveli, with its tradition and its unchanging  
patterns. She thought of the big gilt-framed portraits  
in the men's apartments. Six generations of the  
family looking down on her, each face reflecting  
the confidence of his lineage. Geeta said to herself:  
What if I cannot trace my ancestry beyond my  
grandfather? That is no reason why I should  
surrender; she was filled with rebellion and her  
face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed  
by the Haveli. (100)

After winning permission for classes from Bhagwat Singh Ji, she later on won appraisals from the women of the Haveli too, as Sita, being educated, got suitable match for her marriage. Manjhi Bua Sa appreciates her saying, "I am glad you are bringing new ideas into the Haveli" (115). Geeta found the woman of the haveli shared a common past.

Geeta also brought winds of change in the Haveli when she started teaching the children of the servants and maids as well. Although Kanwarni Sa seemed little discontent over this innovation as she was afraid that it would bring a bad name to the Haveli, still she tolerated the classes, "because they gave Geeta a great deal of

joy," (131). She however, hopes that the experiment would be short-lived. Indeed, the classes grew in popularity. But the opposition too, continues. She meets the challenge of Nandu and Kanta who are Geeta's aunts-in-law "with aristocratic restraint"(136). However, being supported by her mother-in-law, Geeta is overwhelmed with gratitude and admires her. She is also filled with remorse at having caused so much pain to her. Geeta is so grieved that she takes all the blame on herself and offers to ask the girls to stop coming to her to study. But "the generous lady would hear no such thing and insists that the classes continue as before. Geeta bursts into tears, and putting her head in her mother-in-law's lap, sobs like a child." (140)

Geeta no longer felt trapped in the haveli. She felt that she had changed. She had seen the value of kinship ties and wanted to preserve the ancestral dignity of the Haveli:

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. (170)

She did not like the rigidity, but what irked her most was the ill-defined nature of her role in the family. She could not become one with the Haveli women nor did she want to. She felt great pleasure during her classes. She also started sewing classes and engaged a woman to teach them to cut an embroidery. Bhagwat Singh Ji, realising that with the end of the princely Era, the old pattern of life could not possibly continue for long, supports Geeta's attempt to make the women less dependent on the havelis. Kanwarni Sa herself is all praise for her daughter-in-law:

I should be grateful; an educated girl like her could so easily have been a total misfit here. What could we have done, Pari, if she were insolent or worse, indifferent? No she has never raised her voice to me, and in her own way she is proud of the Haveli. (118)

Apart from the approval for the right of the girl for education irrespective of her class distinction, Geeta also fights for the rights of the mother to have a decision in the marriage of her daughter especially to prevent a child marriage which has a high approval of tradition. She at once speaks, 'Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can't get engaged at this age'. (205)

Rama Mehta, in comparison to Geeta, created another character in the sub-plot of the same novel, Lakshmi, Gangaram's wife and one of the maids in the Haveli who is also loved by every member of the Haveli. When her husband Gangaram tries to abuse and beat her for some misunderstanding created by Hiralal, the driver, she does not take it casually and decides to leave the Haveli forever. Her stand is in a way stronger than that of Geeta. She does not become submissive in

any case and also does not accept the stigma and her insult and sticks to her decision of leaving the Haveli forever even she had a daughter left behind. She also shows her loving nature and feelings of motherhood through her frequent visits to Sita's school. She does not attend Sita's marriage ceremony but she sends all the auspicious things to her. She is never seen back in the Haveli again. Whereas despite the alienation faced by Geeta in the prevailing culture she still is a participant in the culture. As the novel progresses she is seen to find a space within the limits of that culture. But these victories never prompt her to underestimate the traditions of the haveli or the conservative people. Instead Geeta's adaptability, compromise and forbearance help to resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity. The concern and care of her husband and his relatives also help her to acquire this amalgamation. With this adaptability and compromise, Geeta appreciates the life in the haveli, adjusts herself and becomes finally, its mistress. After the death of Bhagwat Singh Ji, his son, Ajay becomes the master of the haveli and Geeta, the new mistress. The novel ends here with a promise that the new mistress will bring out a harmony between tradition and modernity. Rama Mehta's narration and Geeta's search for identity in the conservative haveli thus concludes with this positive and hopeful idea of preserving the good traditional concepts and accepting modern values when it is necessary. She has gone from dissatisfaction to acceptance, from tolerance to generosity, and finally to magnanimity, although the death of Bhagwat Singh Ji and the widow attire of his wife draw sympathy and produce tears in the eyes of the readers who are actually involved in the journey of Geeta through *Inside the Haveli*.

The novel portrays the educated heroine's journey from modernity back into the traditional world behind the veil, where the severe restrictions of etiquette and subservience dominate life. When Rama Mehta wrote this book, the society itself was passing through the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. The ethos of the novel is neither the victory nor the defeat but of harmony and understanding between the two opposing ideas.

Geeta's modern thoughts and progressive views, for which she has struggled earlier, are still there. The novelist focuses on the conflict and consciousness of women in post-Independent India. Like the protagonist of the novel, a number of young educated modern women after their marriage are shuffled into an entirely different and contrary atmosphere. They are isolated from their family members. They are confused amidst pressures, demands and expectations of their new roles and their in-laws. In spite of all this, many women succeed in retaining their self-respect and possess their own space through efforts and consultation. Geeta is one of them because she too succeeds in her negotiation in her in-laws' house. She understands the blissful truth about herself that she is not a mere chattel but the veritable chief of *Jeevan Niwas*. Haveli cannot be a prison to one who has realized the truth that true fulfillment lies in living for others, like the senior master of *Jeevan Niwas* who, like a huge banyan tree, sacrificed his life so

that the Haveli may get nourishment. Modernization cannot harm it in anyway. She does not simply submit to the native traditions, nor does she stand passively at the crossroads of traditions and modernity. Her problems are solved by a slow process of adjustment aided by the collective sympathy nurtured by every character in *Inside the Haveli*. Her attitude and her decisions in her martial home provide a suitable alternative for women's education which ultimately proves that even a single woman if educated and coherent, can become the cause of a social change.

Though the revolution has begun which is being canonized by many writers and women themselves have reached the profound level of success devaluing gender inequality, it cannot be denied that the psyche of Indian women still needs to be reshaped which demands more concern and further research work afield.

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