

Treatment of Indian Women : A Comparative Study of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and Shobha De's *Snapshots*

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Abstract. The paper endeavours to examine the different shades of women. The purpose of the study is to evaluate women's perfidy and fidelity in the male chauvinistic society. Rama Mehta and Shobha De are the two novelists articulating the different problems of Indian married women. De's characters fight against traditional beliefs. They are not the slaves of the patriarchal society rather they are the symbols of self-assertion and self-fulfilment. *Snapshots* is the example of women's prime need and their fulfilment of desire. Whereas 'Purdah System' is replicated in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* depicts the predicament of women. The novel exhibits the prevention of women to cross the threshold of the haveli. To be obedient and devotee of husband defines 'Stridharma'. If a woman does her duty heartily and willingly it is her pleasure but if she is forced to do, is called victimising a woman. Our Indian women novelists have presented a huge varieties of women who caste aside the orthodoxical norms and strike a balance between the interior and the exterior world.

Keywords : Femininity; physical bludgeon; barrenness; commercial artist.

Women novelists play a vital role in Indian writing in English especially in the genre of fiction. Many of them have brought into notice women's issues and it is the requirement of the time also. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Shobha De and many more have dealt with the problems of women's predicament scrambling with the tough situation. Their writings depict love-hate relationship, the culture alienation, identity crisis and gender discrimination.

Rama Mehta is a sociologist, lecturer and of course a novelist. Her writings *Western Educated Hindu Woman*, *The Hindu Divorced Woman* and *From Purdah to Modernity* present the conflict between tradition and modern life putting a profound impact on Indian mindset. Mehta was one of the first women to be appointed to India's foreign service but she had to resign from her position after her marriage. Her novel *Inside the Haveli* is the manifestation of her own life experience as a bride in the aristocratic haveli in Udaipur.

The novel delineates the character of Geeta. She is educated, intelligent and a smart girl. She has never seen the system of Purdah. She is typically a Bombay girl and is living at the place where there is a free mingling of men and women. But

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after her marriage, she has to dwell in the Rajputana aristocratic haveli in Udaipur where she has to live putting veil all the time as it is said in Udaipur that strangers must not see the beautiful face of women. Gender discrimination prevails in the people of the haveli. Girls are considered a burden there. If girls are born people start regretting and wailing:

Who else would have thought of the smallest
menial in such difficult times to celebrate the
birth of a great-grandchild and that too only a girl?

(Inside the Haveli, 51)

The girl's education in the haveli was proscribed. People didn't want the girls to be educated. They agreed to the fact that education is a good thing but it is not the custom in Udaipur to send the girls to school. As it is the mindset of the people that if a girl is educated she will never touch the broom and people often become afraid of marrying such girls. The barrenness of thought shows their absurdity:

...so you had better learn to cook. Reading and
writing will not keep the rats from nibbling at the
sacks of wheat. (26)

They didn't want to mortify their dignity to break the unshakable rule accomplishing the girl child. But the male was the biggest asset of the haveli. They were opulent and were given exuberant rights. Being in the same haveli, Ajay Singh, the son of the family, unlike girls of the same family, was highly educated. He was a science Professor. Geeta, leaving her uncompromising and new-fashioned life, put her foot on the compulsive ground of Udaipur where the women of even upper class including her mother-in-law keep 'purdah'. Geeta was encircled by the women. They were singing at their highest pitch but their faces were covered. Geeta had pulled her saree up to see the women but she was ridiculously told :

Where do you come from that
You show your face to the world? (17)

Geeta was bewildered to see the orthodoxical rituals of haveli but she tried to follow all the instructions given to her. Sometimes she felt that her getting educated was a punishment to her. She used to do all the activities to impress the haveli members. Whenever she bent down to touch the feet of the women they said:

Look at her, she does not even know how to
touch the feet properly. (18)

The harsh and conservative norms were so strong that the women could not see the external world. Crossing the threshold of the haveli was the sin and women were not ready to pay the price for that. Even after two years of Geeta's marriage, her father-in-law was stranger to her. She was not allowed to talk to her husband during day time. Men including her husband disappeared before the sunrise. Women were not permitted to go to the male's section in the haveli. Men were considered the supreme god. Their slightest wish was women's prime command. The separation of the haveli was quite essential to maintain the purdah. Even the closest male relatives could not come without a proper announcement. The adamant rules prevail years after years:

The process of a woman being made of possession of a man is a gradual one. Historical and sociological aspects seemed to have contributed their share keeping the women behind curtains.

(Meera, 17)

When Geeta came to Jeewan Niwas as a bride she was illuminating with her jovial thoughts. She was not afraid and nervous about going to a different family which was completely unknown to her. She was very lively and spontaneous. She never learnt to conceal her feelings. Her parents always encouraged her to speak her mind and never be frugal to give affection. She was childlike, enthusiastic and never hesitant to speak anything before anyone. When she found herself confined in the walls of the haveli her dreams started to shatter. She started to lose confidence in herself. She felt her happiness and laughter cremated in the ground of haveli. In spite of doing all the chores, she got only sarcastic remark that she was not like the other haveli women. She was educated so she could not adjust. Geeta wanted to cry bitterly. She was suffocated by the tough and the unchanging pattern of the haveli. She wanted to scream against the passionless people and rituals but she has her mother's words memorize :

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)

The women of the haveli were like those of the imprisoned birds who had been given all the pleasures besides liberation. Because of the bashful attitude, timid lifestyle, and strict law they didn't have friends unlike the people of other Havelis in Udaipur. Living in the frigid atmosphere Geeta has also been changed. She gives up all her girlish behaviour and forgets her carefree life. Her gleeful way of talking was replaced with the nonchalant talks. She was tormented with the hazy concept and she accepted the fact :

Women behind thick walls had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show. (110)

Geeta could no longer hide her feelings before her husband Ajay Singh. He was the man of good temperament. He understands the problem of Geeta. He was not fully satisfied with his job and for the better option, he wanted to shift to Delhi. This was the small hope for Geeta to leave Udaipur. She again recollected her happiness with this thought that her staying in Udaipur would be temporary. Ajay Singh was a loving husband and obedient son, too. He was the only son of Bhagwat Singh Ji and did not want to leave them at this old age. He finds himself a spoilt man in Geeta's estimation. But he feels proud to have a wife like Geeta whose desires in the haveli are unfulfilled but she proves to be a devotee and obedient daughter-in-law. Ajay Singh's wish to be separated from his deep-rooted ancestral place was impossible and had given up the idea to leave Udaipur. He consoled Geeta :

I know, it is difficult for you here, but, Geeta, by being depressed, you will not change things. Ajay's voice was anxious and gentle. He paused and in a slow, soft voice added, 'I have neglected you and not thought enough of your life in the haveli. The life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me to try and see what you could do in this atmosphere you must always have confidence in me that I will support you in whatever you decide to do. (52-53)

Moreover, it was not the problem of Geeta only but the other women also. They became fed up with the merciless rule of the Haveli. Of course, there was tranquillity in their lives but not the recreation. Geeta felt their problem. They all wanted to be free from the confinement. The women definitely but superficially accepted the culture and rituals of the haveli.

Geeta decided to educate the women in the haveli as Ajay Singh approved it considering the entry of new idea in the haveli. Earning wages was disgraceful but Geeta kept this thought aside and began her classes. Later, her father-in-law also approved of the idea and agreed that education makes the people sensible and it is the highest form of charity. Geeta brought self-possession into existence in the women. They joined the classes enthusiastically. Gradually they started to recognise the letters:

Their success made them impatient to learn more and they urged Geeta to go faster. (160)

Geeta had changed the life of many girls. They were able to read and write avoiding roaming on the streets. They had another option besides depending on the haveli. She was happy to receive love from the people. She kept her thought aside to leave Udaipur. She was even allowed to sit before her father-in-law and talk to him directly. Now Geeta felt no longer trapped in the haveli. In fact, she started to love the big empty halls but still, she did not like the rigid customs. She accepted the discipline of the haveli without protesting. Certainly, she rectified a sense of compromise, not satisfaction in herself.

Geeta's regained happiness and confidence was again demolished when she was forced to engage her daughter Vijay in early marriage. She was extremely agonized with this thought. She forgot all nobility and raised her voice at the outset :

"Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here," said Geeta in a high pitched voice at last realising her irritation. She said. 'I hate all the meaningless fuss, don't tell me what I should do with my own child.' (32)

Geeta's all efforts end in fiasco. She spread the air of knowledge but failed to change the firm and fixed mindset of the people resulting in Vijay's early marriage. A woman like Geeta was completely depressed by self-derived laws of the male chauvinistic society. Respecting women and doing something in their favour were considered the degradation of their dignity.

Intellect, independence and strength are well-expressed words for masculinity whereas early femininity is associated with struggle, compromise and dependence. But the other shade of Indian women is of the 19th century. They came forward to fight against their predicament. These women were given the title of 'new women'.

The different and embellished shade of Indian women is presented by Shobha Rajyaydhyaksha too, who is also known as Shobha De. She is given the title 'Jackie Collins' because of her lavish and broad writing style. She is the novelist denouncing conventional orthodoxical thought. Her female characters are very broad-minded. In fact, De reveals the secrets of aristocratic Indian women living in an urban society. Her novels like *Socialite Evenings*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sultry Days*, *Starry Nights*, *Second Thoughts* and *Snapshots* present the true picture of independent women. They grapple with the problems and get every suitable solution.

Socialite Evenings delineates the story of Karuna who fetches herself towards the modelling career. She finds her husband a hindrance in her way to film career. So, she divorces him and gets another suitable person who can spend unlimited money on her modelling career. Her next novel *Strange Obsession* speaks of the strange friendship of Amrita and Meenakshi. De is the author who introduces

a lesbian relationship in her writings and never hesitates to expose its deepness. She believes that for the attainment of happiness a woman must go to any extent. *Sultry Days* depicts Sujata, a prostitute who denies accepting the traditional norms and finds satisfaction in her job. *Starry Nights* portrays Aasha Rani, a Bollywood actress whose purpose of marriage was to join film as her career. So she marries Akshay Arora, a film-maker who was already married. In *Second Thoughts*, Maya, a young girl gets betrayal in her marital life and thus finds solace in someone else's company. He brings hope in her life.

De's *Snapshots* describes women's prime need and fulfilment of their desire. It is the story of the fallacious friendship of urban class Indian women. The story revolves around six school friends-Reema, Rashmi, Surekha, Aparna, Noor and Swati. They all decide to meet together after a long time. They gather in a kitty party at Reema's house and reveal their unknown most private secrets. Reema suggests everyone fetch their old and new photographs, albums and snapshots. Aparna is a commercial artist. She is an owner of the Ad agency. She has a relationship with Rohit but does not want to get herself engaged in a marital relationship; she only wants to enjoy the company :

She didn't need sex (no shortage in that department)
She wanted laughter and touched - small, intimate
moments. What she wanted was a steady, warm,
attentive companion.(De, 26)

De next delineates Noor whose parents were always engaged in an extra-marital relationship. Noor was ditched by her fiancé Aamir but she was not devastated. Later her brother Nawaz develops an illicit relationship with Noor which is unacceptable to the family and the society. Rashmi, an actress is a liberated woman. She has economic freedom. But her relationship was not limited to her husband only. Surekha wants to get happiness in her domestic familiar life but fails. She develops an illicit relationship with Dolly like Astha and Pipeelika in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and gets contented. Reema is a married woman but makes her relationship with her brother-in-law, Randhir. Her affair was completely unknown to her husband. His negligence of Reema encourages her to do all that. He comes home tired, finishes his dinner and goes to bed without talking to Reema. The veracity of De's women characters is that they do all the unfair things because of their male counterparts.

London-based Swati is a sex symbol. She acts in English movie. She wants to be a spinster and is a rising star. Her career is everything for her. She is capricious and a full-fledged fashionable girl. When she comes to the kitty party:

She was clad in figure-hugging mini skirt with a
burgundy - coloured silk shirt and a cotton blazer
with boots... The once voluptuous silhouette had

been whittled down to a pleasant curvaceousness.
Swati was far from fashionably anorexic looking. (87)

Swati is an outspoken and fearless girl. She never suppresses her feelings. When she is harassed by Nawaz she says:

Don't try your tricks with me. They may work with poor Noor. But I'm not frightened of you. If you touch me, I'll scream the place down and everybody will know what you just did to me. (134)

De never depicts her characters as the suppressive one rather her women characters are the symbols of equality, liberation and self-assertion. Their prime motive is to enjoy life. They relish the pleasure of the world at any extent. They raise their voice against patriarchal norms. They do not stand for physical bludgeoning. They do not shrink with unfavourable situations. Reema said when Randhir leaves him:

I won't jump off my balcony Or anything. I have other interests In life. My kitty club keeps me going... If I stop meeting Randhir I'll probably take up some other hobby. (157)

These women are not the models of the Vedic period. They can cross all the limits but cannot give up. Their priority is to look glamorous and fulfil their materialistic desires. Thus it can be inferred that the journey of Geeta is quite different rather difficult than those of De's women. Geeta has struggled a lot but the consequence was of little importance. What makes Geeta different from De's women is her uncompromising attitude.

Betty Friedan is an American writer; she writes about the destiny of women in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. She examines the interior and the exterior world of women. Most of the Indian women have no choice but to stuck in household chores and be chained. The main reason for women's suffering is their inability to adjust. The women of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century raised their voice and struggled with the situation for their rights. There is a number of facets of women and for each facet, a relationship is built up. Women are not confined to themselves; they have to play different roles but they don't have to lose their identity and individuality.

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