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EMERGENCE OF WOMAN FEOM PURDAH TO SELF-FULFILLMENT IN RAMA METAH'S
INSIDE THE HAVELI

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to study the emergence of woman from purdah to self-fulfillment in Rama Metah's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Inside the Haveli*. Haveli stands for tradition and convention. The winds of modernity blow into Haveli, when Geetha gets married to Ajay, the only heir of a tradition bound family. In the beginning, we see Geetha being tossed between the two opposing forces of tradition and modernity. She is fascinated by the grand and gorgeous life styles followed inside the haveli and by the munificence and patronage of her in-laws. But she also feels suffocated in the restricting and restricted atmosphere of its inner quarters where purdah and patriarchy pose threats to her independent ways of thinking and living. This paper examines how Geetha emerges from purdah and makes an independent life of her own.

Key words: Haveli, Purdah, Patriarchy, tradition and modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

Fictional literature is often described as the most popular genre of social criticism. It serves as a social document portraying life in all its hues and providing an accurate image of the sensibilities of people and their social cultural ethos. Indian women's writings since 1960s have served as social documents by picturing the status of women, and the different social and cultural forces acting upon them, impeding their progress. Modern Indian women writers have shown great interest in portraying the struggle of the modern educated middle class women to tide over the oppressive forces of tradition and culture. They also seek to depict woman's quest for identity and self-fulfillment. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find this quest for self-definition as the dominant theme of most of the nineteenth century writings by women. Anuradha Roy, in her critical work on *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers*, talks about the modern Indian woman thus:

The Indian woman of the mid- and late twentieth century is placed in a rather different, more complex situation. The Indian socio-cultural environment has felt the impact of the forces of modernization, education and the mass media. Economic compulsions have led to a significant widening of the horizons of a woman's life without a corresponding redefinition of

social values, placing her in the proverbial horns of a dilemma. This is particularly true of the middle and upper-middle-class woman. Educated, enlightened, demanding more from herself and life than her predecessors, conscious of an identity apart from that which links her to a male, she is yet faced by numerous age old assumptions about the temperament she is expected to possess, the attitudes to be displayed and the role to be played. Her experiences, her psychic turmoil, are an epitome of the uneasy transitional phase through which Indian society is re-defining itself in keeping with the changing times. Her outlook broadened through education and a greater exposure to the outside world, she has to confront many demons, both external and internal which still demand from her an unswerving allegiance to an ideal of womanhood forged through centuries of patriarchal impositions. Unquestioning acceptance is now beyond her.... (71)

Rama Mehta, one of the prominent Indian women writers in English, has ventured to present the struggle of one such educated and liberal-minded young woman to define her 'self' in the restraining and restricted atmosphere of the Haveli of Udaipur in her renowned novel *Inside the Haveli*.

Geetha, the woman protagonist of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, finds herself as a displaced person, uprooted from her home where she had been exposed to the fresh air of modern and liberal ideas and where she had imbibed the values of independence and individuality. The unexpected transition that occurs in her life through her marriage reverses her role from an autonomous and assertive woman into an accommodating and adjusting wife, bearing mutely with the long established traditions and conventions of the aristocratic family into which she is married. This paper proposes to analyse how Geetha is enlightened by the social and cultural ethos inside the haveli and how Geetha becomes an agent for effecting certain changes and modifications in the prevailing traditional and cultural practices.

Geetha was born and brought up in the postmodern city, Bombay which serves almost like the cradle of modern culture, giving rise to new fashions, models, and concepts, nourishing and nurturing the new woman of India. In Bombay, Geetha had been differently brought up. She had gone to college where there was a free mingling of boys and girls. It is interesting to examine how such an educated girl who lived freely in an uninhibited and unrestricted world could learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of the world of women in Haveli and how she learns to give her elders the traditional deference.

To begin with, Geetha finds the atmosphere of Haveli oppressive and suffocating not only because of the rigid enforcement of customs and conventions but also because of the overwhelming love and protective care and patronage of the patriarchs of Haveli. The concept of *purdah* was unknown to her before marriage. But after marriage, she is forced to wear *purdah* and keep her face covered always, even when there are no men in the vicinity of Haveli. The moment she gets down in Udaipur, she is surrounded by women singing but their faces are covered. One of them pulls her sari over her face and exclaims in horror thus: "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world" (17). She is repeatedly instructed about the need for wearing *purdah*: "In Udaipur, we keep *purdah*" (17). "Don't ever forget that your head must always remain covered," Pari said solemnly and with authority (18). *Purdah* may be considered as the oldest form of male control, domination and colonization. It is not only a garment or a custom but is also indicative of a social system.

The etymology of the term '*Purdah*' is traced back to the Persian word '*parda*' which means 'curtain'. Far from being merely a physical isolation in terms of dress and living space, it constitutes a mental attitude to a woman's whole existence. It refers to the beliefs and values about the behaviour of women, the restrictions on their movements and the requirements for their respectful and deferential demeanour. Uma Parameswaran brings out the two related but distinct meanings of this traditional practice of woman wearing a veil or a *burqa*: to cover her face from public view and the other that is "more complex and attitudinal, in the sense of a social norm whereby women live in seclusion, both from men and from the sphere of public action" (53). In her article on "Erasing the Margins: Questioning *Purdah*", Jasbir Jain states: "*Purdah* reinforces the idea of female subordination in built in patriarchal societies" (243). After marriage, Geetha looks at the world from behind the *purdah*. Her movements are circumscribed. Her words, speech and emotions are tightly controlled. She accepts the discipline of the haveli without protest. However, being a modern woman informed with progressive views and ideas, she feels like an alien within the towering walls of the haveli in Udaipur.

The haveli has been divided into various sections for men, women and servants. The hierarchy is strictly maintained and profoundly respected for each does his work in his own apartment and moving out of one's space is strictly prohibited:

The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept *purdah*. Their activities were conducted within their apartments. The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter women's apartment. So, no man entered the courtyard without being properly announced. (3-4)

The servants have a different code of conduct to follow. The men and women of this class are free to mingle with each other and maid servants do not cover their faces with *purdah*. Thus *purdah* as a custom is strictly observed only by upper class women.

Purdah is symbolic of seclusion from the other members of the family. On account of this separation, Geetha has zero communication with the male members of her family. She can talk with her own husband only at night. To Geetha who was not dictated to hide herself behind the screen whenever men came into her parents' home, this segregation from men looks very strange and mysterious. In Udaipur, inside the Haveli, patriarchy, the rule of father or the patriarch, is in practice. Patriarchy is a term used to describe a specific type of male-dominated family where women, children, and domestic servants are under the rule and care of the dominant elder male. Practices such as early marriage, dowry, *purdah*, and joint family are in force in patriarchal families which prevent women from going to schools and colleges. It is feared by the elders that education would deprave women and educated women would jeopardize the harmony of family life. Geetha's observations with regard to the male hegemony point towards the nature of the social system called patriarchy: "But in the haveli men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care" (21). It becomes clear that in a patriarchal set-up, women are treated like non-entities or like commodities to be used. As Simone de Beauvoir comments, she is not a subject or autonomous being. She is the 'other' or the inessential. What she says in her *The Second Sex* is worth recording:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other." (xviii)

Geetha, in spite of being educated, has no identity of her own in the world of veiled women. She is almost hidden and invisible within the *purdah*. Most of the time, she struggles hard to breathe inside the *purdah* and feels like lifting it. Her voice is muffled when she speaks. She cannot voice out her views which means she is not supposed to entertain any ideas of her own. She can neither talk nor laugh openly. Though the novel has obvious feminist overtones, Rama Mehta does not dilate much on this idea. She is content to present the conflict between tradition and modernity in the new woman because of her exposure to western education and liberal ideas.

Geetha, the woman protagonist is aware of the pressure exerted upon her by traditional norms and mores. Kanwarani Sa, Geetha's mother-in-law is the very image of all traditional values and norms. She is the custodian of the family honour and prestige. She acts almost like an agent for patriarchy and insists on adherence to the long established traditional beliefs, practices, and customs. She presents a role model for all women inside the haveli. She keeps strict but gentle vigil over the conduct of all women so that there is no space for any transgression of the traditional norms. Geetha reflects about her mother-in law thus:

From the day Geetha came into the family she had to abide by the form and etiquette of the haveli. Her mother-in-law's personality was such that it was very difficult to contradict her or even express a different point of view. She had her own way of prevailing over others, a

blend of craft and tenacity. She never lost her temper; she was always seemingly considerate and gentle. She never raised her voice; she was patient and prepared to listen. It was due to her tact and gentle persuasion that Geetha had been gradually drawn into the life of the haveli without even wanting to resist it. There was something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time. (31)

This is how the elderly women are indoctrinated to propagate and implement patriarchal ideology so that male supremacy continues unchallenged and female subservience continues.

In the beginning, Geetha takes no efforts to uphold her modern ways of life. She hopes that she will be able to escape from the tyranny of age old customs and traditions soon, when her husband gets a job in Delhi. But her mother-in-law is bent upon moulding her into the next mistress of Jeewan Niwas so that their family traditions and mores are passed on to the future generation smoothly. She openly declares that she should prove that she is not wrong in having brought an educated girl into the family. She wants to establish the fact that even an educated girl can be trained to fit into a traditional family like theirs. Thus we see the protagonist being oppressed by tradition, patriarchy, conventions and customs.

When there is an encounter between tradition and modernity, it is inevitable that they influence each other. Geetha finds herself drawn towards some of their splendid and magnificent ways of life. "There is something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time" (31). She is greatly fascinated and to some extent even hypnotised to see the pomp and splendour of her first child's birthday celebration. Geetha admires the goodness, kindness and greatness, the dignity, decorum, and refinement of the men of Udaipur:

Even though Udaipur was no longer a feudal state, the traditions of Mewar seemed safe in the hands of these stern-looking men, all of whom seemed so composed, so determined and so refined.... These were good people, gentle, kind and chivalrous.... How could she allow little discomforts to blind her to the great traditions of the family? (40)

She is profoundly impressed by the strength and support provided by these patriarchs not only to their own families but also to the servants and their families. Geetha is also amazed to see the supreme and almost 'superhuman' (171) devotion of the servants in the havelies. Their loyalty and devotion towards their masters and mistresses know no limit. It is unshakable and does not change even when the fortunes of the masters change. However, she is also aware that the condition of women and the maid servants in the haveli needs to be improved.

Education is the first strategic weapon that Geetha takes up for improving the plight of women in the havelies. She remains stubborn and defiant in her decision that Sita, the daughter of a servant maid, should be sent to school along with her daughter Vijay, in spite of the strong opposition from her mother-in-law and Pari. She wins the support of her father-in-law in this move. Slowly even her mother-in-law and Pari understand the good intentions of her proposals. Ajay, her husband applauds her efforts: "You did the right thing. I am proud of you. It is time for the new ideas to enter the haveli (137). Though he too entertains such modern ideas, he is a bit hesitant to bring them into practice lest he should hurt the traditional sentiments of his father and mother. She proves that education does not spoil a girl, as Sita grows into a well-behaved, responsible girl. She feels proud, when Sita gets an educated boy as her husband and when he insists that he needs only an educated girl like Sita to be his wife. Thus Geetha is audacious enough to think about such drastic changes in the tradition-bound family. The woman protagonist of the novel is neither a militant nor a radical feminist in her outlook and attitudes. She is very moderate and practical in her attempts to bring some modifications in their ways of life.

Another reformatory step that Geetha takes is her attempt to educate the listless women of haveli and bring them out of ignorance, superstition, and confinement. She teaches them to read and write. She also takes sewing and stitching classes to them so that they can spend their time usefully and become economically independent. Her initiatives receive mixed reactions. Her husband and father-in-law appreciate her endeavours. But the mistresses and elderly women of the havelies complain that her classes disturb the daily routine of their lives. They also find fault that it undermines their authority and makes their servants defiant

and rebellious. She feels terribly hurt by such complaints. She stops all her classes for the sake of preserving the prestige and dignity of their family and also for the sake of respecting the sentiments of her mother-in-law who, despite her disapproval of Geetha's classes, defends her by all means. Thus, Geetha gets trapped by the love and support of her family and becomes the custodian of her family's honour, prestige and traditions. She says, "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).

Though she gets accustomed to the traditional life of haveli, she does not give up her allegiance to modern values. There is a gap between her and the other haveli women who hold on to the old customs blindly and rigidly. "She could not become one with the haveli women nor did she want to. The tension between her and them, though muted, remained" (178). In his article on "Rama Mehtha's Inside the Haveli: A Synthesis of Tradition and Modernity", Chotte Lal Khatri describes Geetha's journey towards self-assertion thus:

She carves out her own identity as a new woman living within the ambit of tradition. She neither shatters the ancestral dignity, nor gives up essentials of modernity. She keeps some of them in suspended animation and waits for her turn to be the mistress of the haveli when she will easily bring about the desired changes in the role of women in the haveli. Still she succeeds in relaxing the rigidity of some customs. Now she can sit before her father-in-law and even talk to him. (111)

Geetha gets the freedom to do anything in haveli, so long as she does not disturb its routine life. But she encounters the biggest problem of her life, when a marriage proposal comes from Dault Singh's wife for her thirteen year old daughter, Vijay. Dault Singh's haveli is the richest one in the old Udaipur. Geetha gets into a tantrum, when her in-laws talk about Vijay's marriage without any regard or respect for her education. She abhors the idea of child marriage for any girl and how can she bear such an idea, when it comes to her own daughter. She throws all her decency and decorum to the winds and speaks bitterly and furiously thus:

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 Vijay will marry when she is still a child.... 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? (206)

Again, she is not able to stick on to her decision firmly, as her father-in-law tries to convince her about the suitability and desirability of her daughter's marriage with Vir Singh. He also assures her that the marriage will take place only after Vijay completes her education. She realizes the wisdom of her uncle's words and does not protest further. However, the emotional tensions and tantrums regarding Vijay's marriage shake the peace and poise of the family and her father-in-law falls sick irretrievably. After his death, Geetha becomes the mistress of the haveli and the responsibility of preserving the traditions of the family falls on her shoulders. It may be hoped that Geetha and her husband, with all their modern ideas and values, will provide still better nourishment to the family tree in accordance with the changing times and allow it to grow and become fresh in attitudes and approaches.

In her article on "Feminist Literary Theory: Creating New Maps", Sarla Parker talks about the new Indian woman thus:

Side by side of this conventional stereotype there is now what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan calls "the emergence of a 'new Indian woman' in media and official discourse in India today, a construction which serves not only to reconcile in her subjectivity the conflicts between tradition and modernity in Indian society, but works also to deny the actual conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives" (Sunder Rajan, 129). Modernity, according to this version instead of deflecting the Indian woman from her traditional roles and chores, facilitates their easy and efficient performance and thereby vindicates her Indian identity. (Jain, 24)

This quotation is very pertinent here as we find Geetha the woman protagonist overcome the pressures exerted upon her by the traditional stereotypical image of ideal womanhood in order to keep her self-identity as a modern educated woman intact.

In many of the novels of women writers, we see such women characters who, caught between the antagonistic forces of tradition and modernity, put up a fight to resist patriarchal forces and to carve their own identity. Just like Geetha in *Inside the Haveli*, Laila, in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, is also placed precariously between two contrasting ways of life: the security and support extended by the traditional purdah existence and a modernist urge towards an unrestricted individualistic existence. Laila does not make any compromise with regard to her individual desires and dreams but she too, like Geetha, realizes the greatness of the traditions of the taluqdar family. Both Laila and Geetha serve as the alter ego of their creators. Both of them reflect their authors' ambivalent attitude to tradition. They neither adhere to their tradition wholeheartedly nor do they reject it outright. They have to adapt, adjust and make compromises in their journey towards individuation and self- fulfillment. This is the case with most of the educated middle class women in India.

To put it briefly, Geetha manoeuvres adroitly to synthesise the positive characteristics of both tradition and modernity. First, we see Geetha being tossed between the two opposing forces of tradition and modernity. Sometimes she even appears to be inconsistent, as her admiration for some of their traditional customs impedes her progress towards modernity. But she takes all possible efforts to educate women and make them intellectually and economically independent. Modernity has nothing to do with rigidity. Geetha turns out to be an accommodating daughter-in-law and not an adamant or rebellious one. With all her readiness to accept the traditions of haveli and her desire to introduce certain modern values and customs in haveli, she wins the hearts of all the people around her. Through her woman protagonist, Rama Metha seems to suggest that modernity does not lie in total rejection of anything ancient or traditional and that real education helps one to accept whatever is good and great in the past and bring necessary modifications in the present so that life goes smoothly into the future. Geetha represents such a wise merger of tradition and modernity. She is a very good role model for all modern educated women who have embarked upon a journey towards emancipation and empowerment.

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