

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 2 February 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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Inside the Haveli: A Study

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A Interesting Account of Indian Family

Inside The Haveli (1977), the only novel by the sociologist writer Rama Mehta, raises certain pertinent issues that need immediate attention and examination. John Kenneth Galbraith says that the novel presents “A wonderfully interesting account... women should not miss it; neither should men.”

The title of the novel itself throws ample light on the issues and aspects that the novelist promises to explore in the novel that won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1979.

Traditional Ways and Modern Girl

Geeta, the protagonist is a girl born and brought up in Bombay. She had studied in co-educational college and had an exposure to metropolitan life. She comes to Udaipur as the nineteen-year-old bride of Ajay Singh, a professor of science. Ajay’s ancestors were the ministers of the Ranas of Udaipur and their haveli, Jeevan Niwas, was one of the biggest and the most prestigious havelis of Udaipur. It is an immense cultural shock for a spontaneous, vivacious and educated girl like Geeta to adjust and adapt to the stringent and traditional ways of the haveli, wherein women kept purdah.

The moment she lands in Udaipur, she is chastised for being bare faced and made to realize that she is an outsider even by the maids of the haveli who had come singing to the railway station to receive the new bride:

“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?’ (P.17)

Geeta finds herself suddenly enclosed and encaged in a huge haveli where she is all the time surrounded by women. From a nuclear and educated family she has come to find a horde of maids, their children and women from other havelis who keep visiting one another on the slightest pretext in addition to her mother- in -law and grandmother- in –law. Malashri Lal opines:

“(M)arriage brought Geeta from the outer world of modernity to the enclosures of the threshold.” (88)

Interesting Encounters

Another peculiar and intriguing factor she encounters is that there are different apartments for the males and females of the haveli. The servants have their separate quarters. The upper class women observe strict purdah and do not interact with their men folk during the day. The males conduct their business from their own separate apartments and their visits are announced beforehand. No such rules are applicable to the maids and servants. They intermingle freely and do their jobs:

“In their courtyard there is no dividing wall, the maids are free to talk to their husbands; they don’t have to wait till the darkness of night settles over the haveli to share their thoughts with them.” (P.06)

Even after two years of her marriage, Geeta has seen neither her father-in-law nor her grandfather-in-law, yet the whole haveli revolves round their needs and demands. Their presence is felt every moment in every nook and corner of the house.

Patriarchs

Though the novel apparently appears to be all women novel and dominated by them, yet, in fact, it is the patriarch of the house whose will is command and not even a leaf can stir without his permission. All the activities of the haveli women, maids and servants are motivated to keep the males of the haveli satisfied:

“...In the haveli the 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.” (P.21)

Getting Adjusted?

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Geeta feels subdued and lonely in the haveli. Even the maids try to indoctrinate her in the ways and traditions of the three hundred year old house. Her movements are diffident and clumsy in the beginning. Moreover, she is a matter of curiosity for the women of other havelis as well. On the very first day the women had declared:

“ . . . She will never adjust. She is not one of us.” (P.29)

While her mother-in-law, on the other hand, wanted to show them that “even an educated girl can be moulded.” (P.30) It was her mother-in-law’s considerate and sympathetic attitude towards her, and the love and care of her husband that facilitate her adjustment to her new environment.

Gradually, she learns and comes to respect some of the traditions, yet her occasional outbursts are clearly indicative of the fact that she is not prepared to surrender her individuality completely. On being reminded by Dhapu, her personal maid, to restrain herself in showing affection towards her newborn daughter Vijay publicly, she bursts out:

“Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here’ . . . I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don’t tell me what I should do with my own child!” (P.32)

Trapped in Haveli, Yet Glimpses of Freedom

On such occasions, Geeta finds herself trapped and a prisoner in the haveli with only a ray of hope that her husband might shift to Delhi, as has been promised to her. But time passes and Vijay is now a school going girl. On an impulse, Geeta decides to also send Sita, the daughter of the maid Lakshmi, to school. Sita is a motherless girl and exactly of Vijay’s age. Her mother Lakshmi had rebelled against her husband’s false accusations and had left the haveli never to come back. It is for the first time that Geeta comes in direct confrontation with the conventions of the haveli.

Education for a servant girl is a very bold decision by Geeta. She gets the support of her father-in-law, while all the servants and the maids of the haveli and her mother-in-law criticize her for this decision. The haveli culture required total and unquestioned submission to its rules and conventions, so the women were kept enclosed within the gigantic walls and married young so that no rebel could raise head. As Rama Mehta herself observes that the educated women are less keen to uphold older values that they find repressive, harsh and mostly meaningless. She says:

“The younger generation is looking to maximum opportunities of prosperity and status and is less concerned with maintaining the socio-religious obligations towards caste- community.” (159)

The Fear of Social Castigation

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The women and even the servants co-operated fully to keep the laws of such havelis intact for fear of social castigation as “There are no secrets; there could be none in the haveli. It is one household, all the courtyards are connected.” (P.6) Geeta feels intrigued as well as disgusted when she finds the women and maidservants of Udaipur lamenting their constricted and harsh conditions of life yet at the same time accepting everything as their fate. The oldest maid of the haveli Pariji once recounts her childhood:

“The mistress was shrewd . . . I was not allowed to play like other girls of my age. It was not considered proper for a widow to be gay and carefree . . .” (P.24)

Yet, Pariji resents the most when Sita is sent to school. The daughters and daughters-in-law of other havelis with “their bashful glances and timid ways” appeared to Geeta “. . . Shrewd and calculating. They never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feelings . . . Their large eyes full of yearning and longing looked dreamily on the world beyond from behind their veils . . . It seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when they would be freed from their confinement. But on the surface they showed no dissatisfaction.” (P.87)

Bold Moves and Bold Characterization

Dr. A.G.Khan rightly avers that “Mehta deserves commendation that she did not allow her protagonist to succumb to stagnation or helplessness” (43) of the haveli’s women. Geeta holds the front courageously, yet the criticism and pungent remarks by the maids and the servants of the haveli make her apprehensive of her own decision:

“ I should never have interfered in her life . . . I have disturbed her life, and above all, my own . . .What a terrible mistake I have made.” (P. 106)

Despite all the disorientation and criticism, Geeta succeeds in sending Sita to school and the attitude of the maids and the haveli women mellows down. She does not stop here and starts classes for the haveli maids and their children. Ajay and her father-in-law praise her for her efforts:

“ ‘You did the right thing; I am proud of you. It is time for new ideas to enter the haveli.’ Said Ajay Singh with conviction.” (P. 137)

But for Geeta’s mother-in-law, it was again a whim on her part and she confides in Pari:

“Let Binniji amuse herself .Her enthusiasm won’t last long; she will soon get tired of the women. Then let us see what she starts next.” (P. 161)

Education – Change in Life and World View

Geeta continues with her efforts to bring education to the servants, though she thinks of revising her decision off and on. She is full of hatred and indignation when her cousin-in-law, Manji Bua Sa who once appreciated her for “ bringing new ideas to the haveli”, and declares:

“ It is no good living on in the past; for the sake of our children, we must look to the future.” (P.115) comes complaining to her mother-in-law about the classes that Geeta holds in the haveli. She finds the behaviour of the maids who attend Geeta’s classes wayward and expresses her fear about the future of the haveli culture. The change that the protagonist is trying to bring about is neither welcome nor acceptable to these women who find social security and moorings in the old patriarchal culture and rigid traditions of the haveli.

Despite all the odds and criticism, and Geeta’s own ambivalence towards her endeavour the classes continue and, in fact:

“Geeta knew that some of the maids were forced to leave the classes, but even those havelis which tried to threaten or discipline their servants encouraged their own daughters and daughters-in-law to go and learn something useful from the classes.” (P.179)

Malashri Lal opines:

“Mehta points out that upper class educated women must provide the leadership to those born in less privileged conditions. For this they may need to sacrifice some of the modern principles of liberation that they could have grabbed for themselves.” (101)

Ultimate Success and Peace and Redemption

Geeta’s efforts bear fruit and she is appreciated by one and all when Sita is married to an educated boy who has a pucca house, land and bullocks in addition to a promising future. Gradually Geeta, too, is able to penetrate the outer shell of rituals and customs and finds underneath it a deep reserve of warm love, care and affection. She learns to respect the continuity, validity and strong emotional ties of the haveli people.

Her initial awe and fear of her parents-in-law turn into respect and devotion towards them, when she finds them considerate, affectionate, flexible and accommodative. All her defenses give way and she finds herself a willing prisoner in the haveli when they give Ajay and Geeta permission to shift to Delhi if they wish to do so.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar’s remarks are quite appropriate here:

“Although Geeta gradually gets used to its life changing herself in the process, she also subtly changes her immediate environment and the people concerned.”(753)

Another considerable fact that merits special attention here in the words of A.G.Khan is:

“In the process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any she induces her mother-in-law with a feeling of warmth towards modernity.” (44)

Thus 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.

A Cyclical Pattern

The novel progresses in a cyclical pattern. Geeta enters the Haveli as a bride, then there is Vijay's birth followed by the birth of two sons, and the deaths of her grandmother-in-law followed by the deaths of her grandfather-in-law and her father-in-law, Bhagwat Singh Ji. The major crisis that Geeta faces in her fifteen years of stay in the haveli is the proposal for her daughter Vijay's marriage. Vijay is just thirteen-year-old school going girl and proposal of Vir Singh from Daulat Singh ji's family who have been the richest people in Udaipur, is made by his mother. Geeta flares up and out rightly rejects the proposal:

“ ‘Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can't get engaged at this age; ... this was the first time that Geeta had spoken in a raised voice to her (mother-in law).” (P.205)

She laments her decision of staying in Udaipur:

“ ‘What a mistake I made to stay on here; I could have easily persuaded Ajay to leave. This had to come sooner or later. Now I am really trapped and cannot escape. But on this point I will never give in, whatever happens. If I have ruined my life, the children are not going to ruin there.’” (P.206)

This outburst clearly indicates Geeta's dissatisfaction and indignation towards her own life. It also highlights the fact that Geeta could never accept the rigid and stringent rules and traditions of haveli life completely. Despite being educated she has been putting up with all the demands made on her, though grudgingly. In the process she lost her vivacity, spontaneity and confidence. She grew dull, shy and diffident. Being a Hindu girl who has been taught by her mother at the time of her marriage:

“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.” (P.16)

Geeta makes her maximum efforts to adjust and to adapt to her new home and culture. Yet she cannot sacrifice herself completely at the altar of marriage. Trembling with anger she makes her mind clear to her husband:

“I have put up with enough in family, and I am not prepared to bend any more. I won't ever agree this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child.” (P.206)

Ajay's reticence and her father-in-law's sympathetic understanding towards Geeta's concern for her daughter make her revise her decision. After having seen Vir Singh and listening to the wise and experienced words of her father-in-law, 'She was no longer sure of herself.' (P.201). Before his death Bhagvat Singh ji declares that under no circumstances would Vijay be dropped out of her school. Her marriage will take place only after the completion of her studies. Throughout the novel, Geeta's attitude towards the haveli is ambivalent and indecisive. Sometimes she appears to appreciate the depth and solidarity of the relations that these people value, while at others she is full of scorn and hatred for the hypocrisy behind such facades. In the process she realizes that the women of the havelis are kept enclosed within the gigantic walls and thresholds, and shrouded in the veils because:

“... The men have no problems in this world of Udaipur.” (P.53)

She once tells her husband:

“... You are all pampered. You lead your lives and think women are mere chattels.” (P.53)

All said and done, this rebellious non-haveli Bombay girl is transformed into the mistress of the haveli and is entrusted with the duty of continuance of its traditions. This climatic event symbolizes her final resignation and submission to the haveli and her fear of failing to match the expectations and demands of the haveli clearly indicate that she has already been preparing herself for the final show, though unconsciously.

A Journey in Haveli

Mehta has portrayed Geeta's journey methodically. In section one of the novel her movements are awkward and clumsy. She is frightened and fascinated by the life of the haveli at the same time. Though she feels suffocated yet she dares not have a whiff of fresh air. She gains some confidence by the time the narrative reaches section II, yet her fascination and her fear of the haveli life turns into resentment and a subtle streak of hatred is also visible in her remarks. Her initial awkwardness is replaced by the assertion of her individuality and by the time the narrative reaches Section III, she is confident, serene yet a subtle rebel whose existence is reckoned with by the haveli people.

Through Adjustments, Inheritance of Leadership of the Household

Finally she emerges as the new lady of the haveli. Though the novel here ends abruptly, yet there is a promise of a future mistress who would look towards the brighter and progressive side of life;

would try to maintain a balance between the centuries old haveli traditions and the demands of modern life. Dr. A.G. Khan points out that Geeta could obtain the “right of the girl for education irrespective of their class distinction, and, right of the mother to have a say in deciding marriage of her daughter. ... Similarly, child marriage was also delayed considerably --- a marvel in Rajasthan even today.” (44)

In the words of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, (P.752), Mehta’s “sensitive piece of realistic fiction written with naturalness and poise had performed the delicate job with ease, grace and sincerity. There is romance but no cheap sex, tension but no violence.” (753)

Sarla Barnabas finds it a fictionalized version of an academic study. She regards it more of a documentary. It has neither plot, nor character study and epic pretensions, yet it “encompasses a microcosm of traditional values.” (245)

In some sense, the novel portrays the ultimate success of tradition in Indian families.

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Notes

John Kenneth Galbraith has been quoted from the cover page of the novel, *Inside the Haveli*. 1977. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

The text has been quoted from the same edition of the novel as mentioned above.

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