



# The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

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## **Corrosion of Self and the Quest for Identity in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli***

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### **Abstract**

*Rama Mehta took up the cause of Indian woman seeking inspiration from the Western feminists such as Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Gubar and Spivak. She condemned the suppression of women and gender discrimination. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, and *The Divorced Hindu Woman* proved revolutionary as these novels projected the issues of women's identity following the tradition of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi who propagated the existential vision.*

**Keywords: corrosion, patriarchal, existential, femininity, psychological, subjectivity**

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* is the story of the protagonist Geeta's identity crisis in the cross-cultural context. Brought up in Bombay, Geeta the independent young woman struggles to maintain her modern identity in a traditional world of the "haveli of Udaipur", where she is married



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off. The aristocratic culture of the “haveli” and the setting of Udaipur in Rajasthan evolve the socio-cultural context in the novel. The cultural shock of the protagonist results in her deflation of self. She is married to Ajay; who is the descendant of “an old aristocratic family of Udaipur” (*Haveli* 15) When Geeta lands in her traditional Jeewan Nivas; the haveli of her husband, from the car Pari makes a remark that pierces the heart of Geeta. Pari whispers that she is an outsider:

She has good strong features but she is dark. Let us see how she adjusts. After she is educated and on top of that she is not from Udaipur. What a risk to get an outsider, especially when there is only one son. ( *Haveli* 18)

Identity of a woman is a the main issue taken by Rama Mehta in this novel. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find “the woman’s quest for self–definition the underlying plot of nineteenth century writing by women” (Gilbert and Susan Gubar 76) Elaine Showalter sees ‘self– discovery’ ‘a search for identity’ (Showalter 13), as the main theme of women’s literature since 1920’s. *Inside the Haveli* explores a journey the protagonist undergoes to overcome her search for identity at the mental, social and physical level.

Geeta enters into the haveli and her corrosion of self begins as she is visibly hurt by the remark of Pari but she becomes aware of her status of the “Other”. Bhabha observes that when a migrant crosses the borders, he is bound to suffer the loss of identity as he is treated as the “Other”. As Simone de Beauvoir comments:



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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.” (Beauvoir xviii)

Rama Mehta has taken a sociological perspective in her novel *Inside The Haveli* which won her the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. As Coser points out, “fiction provides us with a wealth of sociologically relevant material. Literature, like sociology is pre–eminently concerned with man’s social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it” (Coser 3). The two cities Udaipur and Bombay in *Inside the Haveli* stand for tradition and modernity respectively. “In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli” (*Haveli* 29). As Vijayalakshmi Seshadri says, “With the new women’s writing starting in the 1970s, the conventional plot of the novel was replaced by the quest of the new heroine” (Seshadri 60). The entire plot is focused on the question of status of Geeta in the new culture of haveli and her struggle to liberate herself from the which pervades the entire all the mythological and constraining stereotypes. As Uma Chakrawati in *Patriarchy* has pointed out that:

Women are seen as irredeemably weak, feckless and over–



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promiscuous. The social structure and practice of language itself naturalize notions of appropriate and inappropriate female behavior. A society lives by to be constructed rather than given and clearly authorized by systems of patriarchal powers. (Chakrawati 134)

Geeta leaves Bombay and enters in a new world ruled by patriarchal laws and customs. She is surprised to observe supremacy of men as she contemplates her identity in the haveli. Her father-in-law and his father were strangers to her as she “had never spoken a word to them” but their presence was felt everywhere in the haveli:

Though to her they were only names, their presence was felt everywhere in the haveli. Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved. (*Haveli* 19)

Rama Mehta gives the image of shadow to describe the status and identity of Geeta. When Geeta lands in the haveli she meets Pari, the oldest maid of the haveli. Her traumatic life symbolizes the oppressive nature of the haveli. She was ten when she joined the haveli as a maid servant. She got married and soon became a widow. She found the environment of the haveli hard and rigid like red stones. she “had already known four generations of the family, shared in the joys of births and of marriages, in the sorrow of death and misfortunes of the haveli” (*Haveli* 9). She guides Geeta but at the same time digs at the monstrous evil of dowry: Pari narrates the tragic story of sorrow to Lakshmi, the mother of Sita to soothe her:



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Look at me though I have been a widow almost all my life, I am still not free of my in-laws...I have never have a penny left after the demands of my in-laws. And what do I get from them? Nothing. Not even a blouse. But I don't complain. We all have to accept fate. This is no escape from that (*Haveli* 12)

The haveli is a stony cage where women are treated as commodities; women are not allowed any peace and rest in the haveli. Women have to work day and night and the only way to take rest is pregnancy: "I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and only for twenty one days" (*Haveli* 12) Geeta loses she her balance of and her mind is disoriented since she feels disgusted with the superstitions, age old customs and dead rituals observed by the men and women of the haveli. Geeta feels stressed, depressed and restless in her fight with the conservative culture of the "haveli". She loses balance of mind and feels disintegrated behaving like a psychic wreck. Rama Mehta has rightly reported the inner pain of Geeta thus:

She felt depressed and all of a sudden she felt a great desire to be back in her parents home...then she thought of the day she got married. How her mother had stood at the door fighting back the tears that clouded her eyes...two big tears ..her presence in the room seemed to suffocate her. She felt trapped in with its traditions and modernity."(*Haveli* 100)



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Being educated and enlightened Geeta hates narrow-mindedness and orthodox ideas observed by the elders of the haveli but she doesn't dare to oppose them. Bhua Sa and maid-servant, Pari could be easily remarried but the inhuman customs and strict patriarchal rules of Rajputana family inhibit their growth blocking their way to remarry. Freud observes that "unfulfilled wish" brings disorder in the mind of man. According to Freud, "wish fulfillment occurs when unconscious desires are repressed by the Ego and Superego. This repression often stems from guilt and taboos imposed by society. Dreams are attempts by the unconscious to resolve some repressed conflict" (Freud 123) Geeta is shocked to know the difference between her home where her mother and father talked freely but in her haveli there was a bridge between men and women and the life was ruled by formalities, etiquettes and mannerism which she hated. Geeta was anxious to know the life style of men who lived in different quarters and where women were not allowed to enter. She expresses her anxiety thus:

In the first few months of her marriage she had found the separation of men and women romantic, full of mystery. In her parent's home men and women talked quite freely, her mother respected her father but didn't hide behind a screen when his friends were present. But in haveli men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. (*Haveli* 21)

The main cause of Geeta's corrosion of self is her consciousness of displacement. She finds herself an uprooted person from her home where she enjoyed liberty, individuality and freedom to

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enjoy free fresh air of modern and liberal ideas. Her parents regarded her as an educated woman and loved her from the core of their heart. She was free from the artificiality and formalities of life. The other main cause that leads to her deflation of self and disorientation of mind is the oppressive ritual of *pardha*. She is stifled by the rigid enforcement of *pardah* which was unknown to her before marriage. In her haveli she is forced to wear *pardah* and keep her face covered always. The moment she gets down in Udaipur, Pari makes a terse remark: “What would your father -in -law think if he saw you with your face uncovered?” (*Haveli* 20) When she enters in the premises of haveli, 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” (*Haveli* 17). She is repeatedly instructed about the need for wearing *pardah*: “In Udaipur, we keep *pardah*” (*Haveli* 17).Pari repeatedly reminds her: “Don’t ever forget that your head must always remain covered,” (*Haveli* 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. Jasbir Jain in her latest article on “Erasing the Margins: Questioning *Purdah*”,states: “*Purdah* reinforces the idea of female subordination in built in patriarchal societies” (Jain 243). Geetha is a modern girl of Bombay; she is baffled to experience the oppressive restrictions in the world of haveli at a time when science and technology has made tremendous strides and when there is a massive transformation in society everywhere in the world. Geeta feels as if she has landed in a primitive tribal world. She has to look at the world from behind



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the *purdah*. All her movements are circumscribed. Her words, speech and emotions are tightly controlled. Tabassum F. Sheikh in her article *Muslim Women and Social Life* states about the practice of Purdah:

Purdah is a customary practice initiated by men and it is responsible for the subordinate role of Muslim women in the family. Moreover they are of the opinion that, in general, purdah is the root cause of the backwardness of the Muslim community. (Sheikh 154)

Geeta is under obligation to accept 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. *Purdah* is symbolic of seclusion from the other members of the family. The haveli is planned in such a way that free communication between men and women is not possible. Rama Mehta describes the design and structure of the haveli in the beginning of the plot thus:

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 conducted



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their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. Even so no man entered the Courtyard without being properly announced. (*Haveli* 6)

The life in the haveli is dull and boring as there is no scope for original ideas and innovations. All her education is futile as Geeta finds herself stagnating. The psychologists observe that the feelings of defeat, neglect, indifference cause "self-abnegation" in Freudian sense makes a man morbid as the self gets fragmented. In the words of Bernard Weiner "feelings of sadness, low self-esteem, shame and low expectancy of success result in his withdrawal from social activity" (Weiner 170). Geeta is fond of reading books but there is no reading atmosphere. The haveli is old and lifeless like an old banyan tree as Rama Mehta writes: "Sangram Singh ji's haveli like so many others of the nobility was in a gully . . . But like a banyan tree, once in had taken root it spread. Today the haveli has many courtyards with many rooms. Its roots have sunk deep in the soil and nothing shakes the foundations . . ." (*Haveli* 16). The critics are of the opinion that the stones of the haveli symbolize lifeless; dull and stagnating life of Udaipur. Srinivasa Iyengar ironically says: "Within the haveli, all is tradition-bound, and while this means strength and security, it also means isolation and stagnation" (Iyengar 753). The geographical description reveals the traditions and modernity as old and new city metaphorically: "The wall still divides Udaipur into two halves. The new township is beyond the old well and the city within it" (*Haveli* 3).



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To conclude, Geeta is a powerful character of Rama Mehta whose quest for freedom leads to many challenges as she has to fight with the old and obsolete traditions of patriarchal society of Rajasthan. The novelist has depicted the various stages of her corrosion of self; the conflict between tradition and modernity dramatized by Rama Mehta is the chief interest in the novel. On the one hand there are progressive forces bringing about transformation in the society and on the other hand the old obsolete traditions of patriarchy are dragging the society backward. Geeta's life is trapped in the web of tradition and modernity.

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