

SILENCE AND ADJUSTMENT IN RAMA MEHTA'S NOVEL INSIDE THE HAVELI

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores twin themes of silence and adjustment in Rama Mehta's novel Inside the Haveli. The novel set at the backdrop of Rajput Dynasty in Rajasthan. It has been analyzed in the novel that women condemn the patriarchal norms but none is ready to initiate for the revolt. The novel beautifully delineates an urban educated and vivacious girl; Geeta's strangulation-like suffocation in a traditional rule-lover aristocratic family where purdah is must to observe for the ladies. Geeta's life becomes a confinement for her during the day when she is not allowed to see her husband. The paper assesses Geeta's persistent struggle to liberate her from this oppressive and conventional atmosphere. She transgresses man-made rules and emerges as a new Indian woman by starting literacy campaign in that man dominated haveli. It is an orientation of emancipation by Geeta how she manages to carve out her own identity in that ostensibly stifling environment in which she is flung to. She does not stop until she gets back on an even keel.

Keyword: Silence, Adjustment, Education, Suffocation, Emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

It is a hearsay that women have been silent since ancient time but it is confirmed that this silence goads them and that's why they try to heave the patriarchal hegemony which hangs heavy on them all the time. In modern era, women are considered as staunch supporters of men. In ancient times, only men had right to educate and serve the society. Girls were not allowed to school to learn and educate themselves. As there exists no feminist text that may actually reveal their position. Forbes states that "the pre-British records include an abundance of prescriptive texts but fewer documents that shed light on the actual lives of women" (Forbes 18).

Hardly a few Indian writers are found from India who wrote about the Indian fiction in English. But slowly the number of English writers increased. As Derret observes, "Gradually more and more Indians started to write in English to complement the British view of India to begin with; using English to put through their ideas to British audience that might have got a partial view from the non-natives (Derrett 17). And Derrett further Comments:

By the late nineteenth century the Indian reading public had already divided and authors were writing as much to arouse Indians as to impress and interest the westerner. For the first time they were able to communicate with an educated élite in their own country—one might venture to call them a subcaste—besides interesting some people outside India (Derrett 18).

In pre-independent India most of the people speak Hindi and English was perceived as the language of mass media so “it is not so far-fetched to say that novel as a genre was accepted at the same time as English as a literary language in India” (Derrett 27).

Inside the Haveli, at first glance, depicts a cultural upheaval in Geeta’s life who gained momentum through the dominant forces unleashed by phallogocentric world of the haveli. She breaks the silence of the haveli by the steps taken towards her emancipation in the stringent and traditional customs of the haveli. The haveli has its own set rules for the women and it was a big haveli:

Sangram Singhji’s haveli like so many others of the nobility was in a gully. Its first courtyard was built three hundred years ago and there were only three rooms around it. But like a banyan tree once it had taken root it spread. Today the haveli has so many courtyards with so many rooms (Mehta 5-6).

The haveli represents the silence of women in the Rajasthan where this haveli is a symbol of this oppression. The haveli has no violence on the ladies. Though there may be other havelis which are depicted bigger than this haveli, “Sangram Singhji’s haveli is the biggest in the gully although it is not the biggest in the old city (Mehta 6). The haveli has been described outwardly shapeless but inwardly well-planned that is symbolic of the social boundaries of women under the strict and sturdy rules like stone of the haveli:

Haveli has no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various section[s]. The separation of the self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within the apartments. The courtyard connected their section[s] with that of the men (Mehta 6).

Sumita Pal argues that Geeta, like other women, was allowed to enter the outside world occasionally, “The outside world is totally denied except occasional glimpses from behind the veil (Sumita Pal 95). The haveli is designed in such a way so that an eye can be kept on women’s activities and there may not be any secrets in the haveli, “There are no secrets; there could be none in the haveli. It is one household, all the courtyards are connected” (Mehta 6). The birth of a female baby is called inauspicious and burdensome in the haveli. When Sita, the daughter of a servant, was born just after midnight; neither her father, Gangaram nor the midwife; Sarju is happy. It was a stormy night and midwife is not enthusiastic enough to tell her father about the birth of this girl. Rather she lies on the clothes to wait for a good weather. Sita’s father also predicts of a girl birth to hear the birth cry of the child and says to Khyali, “It is a girl”. He further adds if it had been a boy; the midwife Sarju would have come running for the *shagun*, “It is a boy...It is a boy. Give me money” (Mehta 07). On the birth of girl, Khyali is also disappointed and he calls the girls a burden on them:

Why worry? God take care of all those He sends into the world. Girls are a burden, I admit but what one do once they are born (Mehta 6-7).

Geeta reminds that she had met her future husband Ajay, a Physics professor in the company of her brother's friends two years back. She was not quite sure which of the young men had come to see her. When her parents asked if she liked the man in the gray suit, she had said, 'Yes'. Her parents seemed sure that she would (Mehta 15). So, Geeta has come in such a haveli as a bride where almost all males consider girls and women a burden on them like these servants of the haveli. In her work on the position of women in post-colonial societies, Loomba observes:

“while women and gender are seen as emblematic of culture and nation... Women who broke the codes of silence and subservience became the objects of extreme hostility, which, in some cases, succeeded in silencing outspoken women... The more feminist research recovers and re-interprets the lives of women under colonial rule, the clearer it becomes that women, as individuals and as a potential collectivity, constituted a threat and were thus at least partially the target of earlier patriarchal re-writings of “tradition” (Loomba 186).

Geeta belonged to a different world full of liberty in a metro-city of Mumbai and now she has been sent in absolutely different conservative society, “Geeta had been differently brought up. She had gone to college and studied with boys. How could such a girl learn to live in such the constricted atmosphere of a world of women to give her elders the traditional deference” (Mehta 16)? Geeta's mother lived in the city of Mumbai and even she had not thought that her daughter would have to observe *purdah* in the family which is so affluent and the groom is a Science professor. That's why Geeta's mother also tells everything else for her daughter's successful married life except *purdah* as she does not consider worth mentioning as she has not to observe *purdah* in the city of Mumbai:

Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders, respect your mother-in-law and do as she tell[s] you. Don't talk too much ((Mehta 16).

Geeta comes in train and the train stops at the last station. The maid-servants of the haveli come singing to receive the bride. This was a last moment of her liberty. The maids force her to pull her veil on her face. The veil was a symbol of chains on her liberty she enjoyed earlier. One maid pulls her sari on Geeta's face:

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' (Mehta 17).

Geeta feels awkward at this but she remains silent as she was going to enter a new life, a married life. When she sits in a four-seater Fiat car, she feels suffocation but dares not lower the glass of car. When Geeta wants to see her uncle-in-laws and pull her veil aside, then she is again interrupted “No, no you cannot do that...in Udaipur we keep *purdah*. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face” (Mehta 17). She remains for two years in the haveli but she could not see her father-in-law and grandfather-in-law. They remain absolutely strangers to her as men have different apartments in the haveli during day time. She had never spoken even a single word to them. Meeting and talking with females especially with young wives, was strictly prohibited during the day:

The men including her husband seemed to disappear as soon as it was daylight. The whole day they were away in their offices or busy in their section[s] of the house (Mehta 19).

For some times Geeta keeps an eye on the activities of the haveli and she fails to adjust in that suffocating environment of the haveli. It was very difficult for her to pass the boring daily routine of the haveli. She never saw a male of her family during the day time. It was a different world—a world of women. She is now anxious to know to what men do and how they live in the haveli. It seems her duty in the novel is to create peace on a domestic space as was the wife's domain and if she was to be considered to be a good wife—and thus retain her husband's prestige—she was expected to give an excellent performance as a housewife. Being active in her home and passive in her relationship to her husband was the part of her role as a wife. Such a role is in agreement with Loomba's assessment of the family situation in colonial times. She explains the situation by claiming that "the strengthening of patriarchy within the family became one-way for colonized men to assert their otherwise eroded power" (Loomba 184).

One day when all the servants were not there, she thinks to cross the boundary line made for women: "A little shiver went through her body as Geeta thought of the day when she had trespassed into the men's apartments" (Mehta 19). The maid, Pari comes there and scolds her severely and calls her an outsider in the haveli:

What are you doing here all alone, Binniji. I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways...What would your father-in-law think when he saw you with your face uncovered? Binniji, daughters-in-law don't of this haveli don't behave like this (Mehta 20).

Geeta has to sacrifice a lot in this haveli since she has put her first step in it. Purdah has become a bone in her throat that was strangulating her all the time. She has lost "her exuberance, her girlish impetuosity and had forgotten her own carefree childhood" at the stake of observing old customs of the haveli (Mehta 87).

Geeta finds the environment of haveli congenial for men as all of their wished were fulfilled easily, "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" (Mehta 21). Geeta's mother was different from the other women. She had a dominating role in the family and kept all the servants up and going from morning till night. Men were free from all domestic worries. Another adjustment problem with Geeta is that she, being an educated girl thinks herself different from the other dominant members in the house. Had she spent a life like an uneducated domestic wife, everything would have been in her favour, but now she fails to adjust herself in that environment. When Geeta came to the haveli everybody is ready to find fault with her. She finds none in the home she can trust. Only her husband helps her but he is with her but only at night. Her husband, Ajay understands her feelings and tries to enter for a short while on any pretence in the women cell during day also,

Ajay realizes her need and occasionally comes upstairs on some excuse or the other but these visits were short and hurried. Geeta was embarrassed by them. The maids laughed as if they understand why he came to the women's apartment (Mehta 21).

Geeta makes a companion Dhapu, a maid in the haveli who could help her to spend time at ease. In the absence of her Geeta feels restlessness in the haveli, "Without Dhapu, Geeta would have Insisted on going back to her parents (Mehta 22). Pari was an old servant in the

haveli. She came there when she was a child and she has been servicing there for forty five years. She tells her story of pain to Geeta:

I was a child when I came to the haveli and your great grandmother-in-law trained me. She was strict. She kept me busy the whole day. Then once I became a widow. She would not let me put on colours saris or bangles like the other girls (Mehta 23).

She was a very prudent lady and her quote can better describe the theme of this novel, "To be young is dangerous" (Mehta 23). Geeta faces the adjustment problem after years and maids always think, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (Mehta 29). Rama Mehta describes the women's world where they are considered to give birth to their many children. They bless Geeta in such a way, "May you have many sons, my child, and may you always wear red" (Mehta 33). Geeta confronts many problems of the family and she is always ready to cope with the problems alone knowing that men are enjoying their lives. She says, "I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur; you are all pampered. You need your lives and think women are mere chattels" (Mehta 53). In her book entitled Colonialism/Postcolonialism, Ania Loomba describes colonial men's cruel behavior at the time:

Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home. They seized upon the home and the woman assemblies of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be Westernised but all was not lost if the domestic space retained its cultural purity (Loomba 141).

She is not only lady in Udaipur who is thinking in this way. The girls and women in the other havelis are also living the same life like her. She calls their lives "like little canaries in cage" (Mehta 87). She herself feels suffocation in her room of the haveli:

The room seemed to suffocate her. She felt trapped in the haveli, with its tradition and its unchanging patterns (Mehta 100).

Other girls and ladies don't have kettle to muster their courage to fight against the orthodoxy and traditionalism of the society. But from the core of their heart they are unhappy and dissatisfied with the man-made rules in that society and it "seems to her that they are waiting to be freed from the confinement (Mehta 167). Thus, women are considered just to serve their husbands and their family "the only duty was to serve her husband's family" (Mehta 117). They have no their personal identity. They have no right to breathe in free air whereas men are free from all these bondages. Men can come and go anywhere but females are just like a showpiece meant for house. They are like a doll of blood and flesh who have to dance at the tunes of the males of the family.

Later Geeta is successful by starting a literacy campaign for the children of the servants and later for the ladies. She makes her identity as a successful lady by changing the rotten rules of the haveli. She helps send the servant's daughter, Sita to school. She persistently opposes the child marriage of her daughter, Vijay to another rival family in the city. The vast majority of women were denied the access to education and any violation of this rule was considered a grave offence. There is evidence that it was believed that being an educated woman—and education could mean only as much as learning to read—lead to an early death of one's

husband. This popular belief is mentioned in William Adam's *Report on the State of Education in Bengal* where he claims that:

A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow (Forbes 33).

Sumita Pal says about the change in the novel, "The novel ends with Geeta's taking over (Sumita Pal 101). Iyengar contends that novel represents an overall balance:

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 romance but no cheap sex, there is tension but no violence, and there is a feeling for the values and verities (Iyengar 753).

The scene on the global platform is much changed now. Women are now being allowed to take part in education. Unlike the education of men, however, it was never intended to give females full academic education. The aim was to enable them to fulfill their traditional roles better, not to change those roles (Forbes 54). These women are not only double marginalized by the colonizers and by Indian men but also by the other societal rules prevalent in that time. Boehmer claims that:

Colonized women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste (Boehmer 224).

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