
Inside the Haveli – A Journey of a Woman From Subjugation to Emancipation

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Abstract

Rama Mehta was an influential Indian sociologist and writer whose works, including the novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) and her critical essay *The Eastern Educated Hindu Woman*, significantly contribute to Indian literature and gender studies by exploring the conflict between traditional expectations and modern life faced by women from the middle and upper classes. Her book *Inside the Haveli* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979. Her works *Ramu, A Story of India* (1966), *The Life of Keshav* (1969), and *Inside the Haveli* discuss the importance of education and the struggle between tradition and modernity. Mehta's *The Western Educated Hindu Woman* (1970) highlights the differences between women in their twenties at the time of independence who were well educated and spoke English, and their mothers, who spoke no English and were interested in maintaining traditions. Her *Divorced Hindu Woman* (1975) brings out the situation of Hindu divorced women. Understanding the place of her works within Indian sociological and literary discourse enhances their relevance to scholars and students alike. It depicts the conflict between tradition and modern life that women face. The novel explores the conflict between traditions and modernity, with the primary focus on suppression, the struggle for individuality, and the subjugation of women in patriarchal society. In the novel, 'Haveli' plays a pivotal role and carries symbolic implications. During historical periods, kings, queens, and other influential figures of the state lived in havelis, powerhouses where important decisions were made, and the common people held them in great respect and admiration. The traditional havelis were also powerhouses of cultural heritage. *Inside the Haveli* is a milestone in the history of Indian English literature, in which the author successfully demonstrates the essence and feel of a world in which harmful cultural practices are either stopped by initiatives undertaken by those who realised their emptiness or banned by law. However, the change we see today is not the result of the efforts of just one individual, but of the collective efforts of all – social reformers, writers, educationists, and leaders. Education has become pivotal in deliberating on global issues. Every country has its own cultural traditions, beliefs, and customs, which are transmitted from one generation to the next. However, the preponderance of customs renders them unpersuasive, given the inevitable changes brought about by scientific power. The present paper examines the

journey of Geeta's heart within the tradition-bound Haveli. The paper focuses on Geeta's transformation, demonstrating that change in tradition is an active pursuit rather than a passive occurrence.

Keywords: Emptiness, preponderance, persuasiveness, inevitability, tradition-bound.

Introduction:

Geeta, the protagonist of *Inside the Haveli*, is a Mumbai-based girl educated in modern values of gender equality and egalitarianism, yet she becomes the daughter-in-law of an orthodox Udaipur family that upholds its royal heritage and practices the purdah system and child marriage. She bears the taunts of the women with fortitude and, while adjusting to and assimilating their traditions, maintains the family's unity. But she breaks her silence when her sense of justice is disturbed over the education of a motherless girl, Sita. Geeta, with the help of tactics taught to her by her closest maid, Dhapu, can overcome the traditional reservation and obtain permission to educate the child. Later, she delays her child's marriage, secures a conditional arrangement in her child's favour, begins home-based classes to educate the servants and women in her surroundings, and ultimately prevails over the views of all who opposed her ideas. Thus, she ultimately changes people's mindsets, urging them to abandon outdated and harmful traditions or beliefs that harm the community. Finally, Geeta, rather than becoming a blind acceptor of others' decisions, takes the initiative to challenge harmful traditional ideologies, thereby becoming an independent decision-maker. Her mother-in-law had noticed a change in Geeta's life and realised that her daughter-in-law was the one who could preserve the haveli's glory and maintain control over it. When Bhagwat Singhji died, Kanwarbai Sa said, *"You are now the mistress of this haveli. You can't forget its traditions in your sorrow."* (ibid, p.264)

The novel is generally considered orthodox in its acceptance of traditional values. Yet, it tells the story of a woman's journey from subjugation to liberation, from a caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly. When Geeta arrived as the daughter-in-law at Jeevan Niwas, she encountered multiple challenges, including the unfamiliar traditional parda system. She felt indignant but assimilated, adhering to the Haveli's regulations. But later on, she realised that the traditions of the haveli would kill her individuality, taking out her soul from her body. She followed them indignantly, but somewhere she wanted to be rebellious. *"Geeta felt an outsider, an outsider."* (ibid. 114)

Her husband and her mother-in-law might understand her predicament and her mental turmoil, so they gave her freedom to act as she wished. That had not happened before; the primary reason for granting permission for Sita to attend school and for postponing her

daughter Vijay's marriage was that they recognised that educating daughters was a pressing need of the time. But somewhere, Geeta, who was challenging the patriarchy, felt the agony of defying the old traditions. Manji Bua Sa, a cousin of Bhagwat Singhji, was in her early sixties, appreciated Geeta's work and said,

"I don't know, Bua Sa, whether it is right to disturb the life within the haveli."

The remark made by Bua Sa shows the progressive attitude of her; she said, ' *"Do not be afraid. It is time things changed. Once we, the old, are dead, the havelis will no longer survive. It is no good living on in the past for the sake of our children; we must look to the future."* (ibid. 115) *"I am glad you are bringing new ideas into the haveli."*

Thus, the novel *Inside the Haveli* is a realistic work that explores themes such as identity, the struggle between tradition and modernity, patriarchy, and the metamorphosis of personality. The novel spans fifteen years, during which the protagonist, Geeta, and other male and female characters undergo changes, and the haveli serves as a silent observer of those changes. The haveli, which envelops the lives of all the characters, symbolises resilient traditions passed down from generation to generation and observed throughout life. This has happened: the winds of modernisation and the new era have entered the haveli.

Geeta is a representative of the modern, educated woman torn between two worlds: the traditional and the modern. The haveli Jeevan Nivas plays a pivotal role in shaping relationships; it symbolises the oppression and tyranny of man-made customs. The haveli is like an axle around which revolve the desires, hopes, aspirations, fears, happiness, and superiority of various characters who abode within and without it. In

Geeta's case, the battle she wants to fight is between superstition and reality, education and ignorance. The battle is not easy because her struggle is not with enemies but with the people around her, bound by marital ties. The novel also delineates the maladjustment, inconveniences, and indecisiveness the protagonist faces in her husband's house. The novel ends on a positive note, suggesting that adjustment, tolerance, sacrifice, patience, and understanding can overcome difficulties and achieve the highest position. If a person waits patiently, time yields positive outcomes.

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