
HARMONY OF TRADITIONAL VALUES AND MODERNITY IN INSIDE THE HAVELI

RAJENDRA THORAT

Abstract: Rama Mehta's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Inside the Haveli* harmonizes the traditional values and modernity in a significant way. It chronicles the struggle of a young educated Geeta to maintain the balance of traditional values and modernity in the world burdened with age-old traditions of the purdah in Rajasthan. Purdah is a traditional form of colonization, control and domination of women. Geeta initially finds herself suffocated in this new atmosphere. However, in the course of time she realizes that women are not subjugated or humiliated in the haveli. Instead this isolation was only for the purpose of security of women. Haveli had much concern and love for women as everybody respected her and other women. She now thinks of growing up her children in the haveli to inculcate the traditional values in them. She brings changes in the haveli without uprooting the age-old good traditions and assures her mother-in-law that she will be the mistress of the haveli.

Key words: Harmony, Modernity, Purdah, Tradition.

Introduction: Rama Mehta (1923-1978) was a sociologist who had both theoretical as well as practical knowledge of social life of the country, particularly of Oswal and Porwal community in Rajasthan. She herself was married into an aristocratic family that played an important role in political and social life of the Rajasthan state. Rama Mehta's Sahitya Academy Award winning social novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) depicts the life of Geeta in Sangram Singh's haveli called Jeevan Nivas in Udaipur where the purdah system is observed by women. Ideologically, purdah is the oldest form of colonization, control and domination of women. 'Purdah', a Persian word means 'curtain' which covers the physical, social and psychological isolation of women. Uma Parmeshwaran in *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists* comments, "The word purdah has two related but distinct meanings. One is physical in the sense of women wearing a veil or burqa to cover their faces from public view; the other 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 civic and public action" (115).

The novel is a perfect blending of traditional values and modern outlook in a society that respects women and expect to follow them strictly to pass on to the next generations. In Indian family structure, women were assigned different duties- men worked outside, earning, managing worldly affairs, and often fighting for the cause of the family, state or religion. Women bore children, brought them up, and worked at home, cooking, cleaning, and managing home and children. Women constituted homes. It was said in Sanskrit 'Grihinim Graham Uchyate' (A woman is called home). In many Indian languages, the word 'gharwali' a home maker is

used for wife. In fact, women played the most important role of maintaining family customs, prestige and culture. Women also manage the complex kinship network. Men were apparent owners of home but the real owners of home were always women. Feministic approach would often prove to be irrelevant in the context of Indian women.

It has been said that in the Bhagwad Gita, that women are glories. The culture of a country depends on women as they are the preservers of traditional values and culture. Women not only educate them but also train them to be good human beings and ideal citizens of the country. Naturally, to be good teachers, they need to live more restrained and disciplined life in order to set example before their children.

Inside the Haveli attempts the synthesis of traditional values and modern outlook. Usually, traditions are looked down upon by feminists and other modernists. It is worth mention here the views of T.S. Eliot on tradition in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. He says that there are three ways regarding culture: as that of the individual, of a group or class and of whole society. The truest is the culture of the whole society. To understand the culture of any particular society, we must study the culture of the society as a whole. Eliot looked at the culture of Europe as a whole. In India, we must look at the culture of India as a whole. There may be slight differences or variations in certain customs and rituals of a particular group but on the whole, the culture of the country has certain common characteristics. Traditions form a very important base for a culture. According to Eliot, tradition involves all habitual actions, habits and customs. It is a way of feeling and acting which

characterize a group throughout generations and it must largely be unconscious. Tradition is a means by which the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present. Tradition is not a static force but a dynamic force. It is not merely pastness of the past but the present of the past. In this context, we must view tradition in this way.

Rama Mehta has thus synthesized traditions and modernity. Geeta, the protagonist of the novel, comes to the haveli as a bride at the age nineteen. Naturally, as a young, educated Bombay girl, she is labeled as an outsider who knows nothing about tradition and values of the haveli. The women inside proclaim, "She will never adjust, she is not of us" (29). She feels suffocated in the haveli as she is forced to wear purdah. Realizing her depressed state of mind her husband Ajay Singh says in a soft voice: "I know it is difficult for you here and you won't change things. I have neglected you This life in purdah is not for you" (52). Before leaving her house her mother gives her an advice: "Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk to much"(160).

She feels that the purdah system is a kind of cruelty against women but in a short time, she realizes the benefit of the purdah system as it protects her beautiful face from the strange eyes. It does not mean that she accepts it willingly. Her questioning attitude continues. However, in a short time, she feels that women are not subjugated. They are not humiliated or looked down upon. In fact they are respected. An old maid servant is called "Pariji" by all. Even the owner of the haveli Shri Bhagwat Singhji and his wife address her with due respect calling her "Binniji". Little girls are addressed too with polite names. The young always respected the elders and talked with due respect. In the haveli, Geeta finds harmony, discipline and dignity. Yes, there was an isolation and often loneliness but there were comforts and complete security. There were festivals and rituals of all types. Every rite was arranged with elaborate preparations, politeness, courtesy and decorum in the haveli. Geeta felt suffocated in the beginning. She told her husband Ajay to find his job in city like Delhi. He had promised her to do so but by and by Geeta and Ajay were engrossed in their routine life. Ajay kept busy with his work at the University. Soon, he becomes the head of department of Physics in Udaipur University and her hope of leaving Udaipur is diminished.

Geeta had three children. She was trained by her caring mother-in-laws in the ways of the life of the haveli. Geeta carved her place in the haveli as an understanding daughter-in-law. Everybody said

that in spite of her education, she could adjust quite rapidly. Geeta had her own views about life. She sacrificed her freedom for her domestic life but she believed that people should move with changing time. The havelis were no more as rich as before. After independence, there were no kings or princes. Past glory of the haveli was fast disappearing. People outside the havelis did not care for havelis any more. Everything was changing quite rapidly. Even her mother-in-law said that the haveli not as rich as before and no help came from the state any more. Even the states depended on the privy purses that were later abolished. Even the British Government had left India and the sun of the British Empire was no more shining over the globe permanently. Geeta firmly believed that education is the key to change masses. It is of no use fighting against unnecessary customs or traditions. Education must be imparted to all. Geeta makes a bold move by sending Sita, the daughter of a maid servant Laxmi to school along with her daughter Vijay Bai Sa. Naturally, there were protests but her father-in-law supported her saying that people of the haveli must change with changing time. Kanwarnisa said, "We are old and our work in the world is over. But you both are young and the future is open to you" (115).

The haveli always accepted and supported Geeta's new ideas. Her decision to educate all is appreciated by Bhagwat Singhji. As a result she started classes for the children of the maid servants and servants of the neighboring havelis. Again, there were protest and criticism but they all subsided and even the maid servants and other women came to Geeta's classes for learning. Sita's education helped her in getting an educated young man as her husband. Everybody said that it was Geeta who changed Sita's life permanently. Instead of becoming a servant, Sita went to a farmer family with good income. Her husband Shiv Ram was a young educated boy. Thus Geeta introduced certain changes in the haveli that paved the way for more reforms. Her efforts to accommodate the restricted life of the haveli with the benefit of modern education has been appreciated by many critics. In this regard Santosh Gupta comments very aptly: "The harmonious relations that Geeta builds up inside the haveli without either surrendering her own intellectual independence or disrupting traditions reflects her ability to use her education in a creative manner"(123).

When Geeta's daughter Vijay Bai Sa was to be engaged to Vir Singh, She protested very boldly saying that she would not give permission for a child marriage. Even her father-in-law Bhagwat Singhji requested her to think over the proposal

from Daulat Singh's haveli. Daulat Singhji was a reputed man and his son Vir Singh was handsome and educated. He wanted to go to England for further studies. Geeta saw him and felt that he was a match for Vijay Bai Sa. However, she said that marriage would take only after he returns from England finishing his studies. Meanwhile Vijay would also continue to study after engagement. All these conditions satisfy Geeta and she agrees to Vijay's engagement to Vir Singh.

At the end of the novel, Bhagwat Singhji dies and Geeta is extremely grieved, she knows that her father-in-law was truly a great man. She realizes that it is not easy to be large hearted, generous and kind. He believed in traditions but he equally accepted changes. In fact, it was a tradition for him to be kind, generous and noble. Geeta promises her mother-in-law that she would live in the haveli and preserve traditions and values of the haveli. She becomes willing prisoner of the haveli as she realizes that the haveli had given her immense love and concern. She says:

I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me 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? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house. (170)

On the appeal of her mother-in-law Geeta accepts to be the mistress of the haveli and decides to help the haveli in preserving its ancestral dignity and honour. She is the one whom Kanwaranisa looks for comfort and future of the haveli. Manji, pressing her head to her breast, says, "You are now the mistress of the haveli" (264).

Conclusion: Geeta introduces changes and reforms in the haveli by using her education creatively and without uprooting the traditional values. The steps taken by her in those days paved the way for women's education and preventing their early marriages. Geeta's skill lies in doing these things by maintaining a very good balance of traditional values and modernity. Rama Mehta, as a sociologist, suggests that good noble traditions of the past must be preserved and transmitted to the next generations for the survival of the culture. Modernity must be accepted but it should not be used as a means to uproot good traditions. Harmonizing them is the need of the hour. She studied them and found that they had cultural value. They were not meant to subjugate women but protect them from ugly forces of the social life. Rama Mehta has succeeded in giving faithful account of the women centered world of the haveli where women were honored as guardians of the sanctity of the ancient traditions and family pride. The novel is thus a harmony of traditional values and modern outlook.

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Dr. Rajendra R. Thorat/Associate professor and Head/
PG Department of English/Venutai Chavan College/
Karad 415 124 Satara Maharashtra/ drrrthorat@gmail.com /Cell 919420628716