

Rama Mehta: An Epitome of Indian Feminism

Dr. Rachna Agarwal

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Govt. Degree College,

Jahangirabad (B.S.R.)

Email: rachnaagarwal799@gmail.com

Abstract

The new literature, especially by the new woman writers, sheds light on a new woman bulging with a new spirit of confidence and a sense of change. This new woman is out to establish her own identity in a male-dominated society. The story of Indian feminism can not be told without the voices of women who dared to write about their lived realities in the face of silence. Among them, Rama Mehta (1923-1978) holds a special place. She was not only a novelist but also a sociologist, and her works blend the two identities beautifully. While her fiction gives voice to women trapped in the rigid walls of patriarchy, her sociological writings carefully analyse their struggles and contradictions. Rama Mehta appears on the horizon of new literature with the same intent. However, she is different from other women writers. She does not strive for sexual description, nor does she advocate sexual freedom in her fiction. She writes of a new woman, but within the ambit of Indian Feminism.

Keywords

Male-dominated , Feminism , Aristocratic , Constrain , Rigidity, Vivacious

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Dr. Rachna Agarwal

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Rama Mehta established herself as a writer in the genre of women's writing by writing her one and only novel, *Inside the Haveli*. This novel brought her recognition in the form of Sanity Academia Award in 1979. Before writing it, she had produced her studies on two important aspects of Indian women indicated by the titles *The Western Educated Hindu Woman* (1970) and *The Divorced Hindu Woman* (1975). In 1976, she wrote an article entitled *From Purdah to Modernity*. All these articles served as a prelude to her novel *Inside The Haveli*.

What women writers write is not a presentation of just a figment of their imagination, it is rather a presentation of their real-life situations. Janet Wolff says this in her book *Feminine Sentences* -What women write or point out is clearly related to their experiences. These experiences, in the nineteenth century, early twentieth century and now, have been very different from those of men. Women writers have focused on, and they are concerned with, "the situation of women in society". (Wolff, p. 3)

The observation of Janet Wolff is largely true about Rama Mehta, who is at the crossroads of feminism. There are interesting parallels between the life history of Rama Mehta and the narrative in *Inside the Haveli*. Her own female self-intercedes in the narrative. She was among the first women to be appointed in the Indian Foreign Service and was married to Jagat Mehta, a fellow officer, and was forced to resign after her marriage. Thereupon, she took up residence at Udaipur, which was her husband's native place. Their residence was known as Jiwan Niwas, where she was looked after by two maids called Pari and Dhapu. She gave birth to a daughter, and the child was named Veejay. All this echoes the fate of Geeta, the focus of *Inside the Haveli*, who is an educated and vivacious girl. She is married into a very conservative and traditional family of Udaipur, and she abruptly finds herself living in purdah in her husband Ajay's ancestral wavelike, Jiwan Niwas.

The plot of the novel centres around Geeta's struggle to maintain the modern values that she had imbibed and lived by in her parental home. It is a chronicle of her struggle to hold on to her identity in claustrophobic surroundings.

Professor Malashri Lal has pointed out in *The Law of the Threshold* that Rama Mehta was passionately concerned about two things: the effect of tradition and the effect of change on Indian women. Both these concerns took concrete shape in the form of the novel *Inside the Haveli*. She herself had a deep and lasting respect for Hindu traditions and Indian values, and yet she was modern enough to realise that change is necessary.

Inside the Haveli is a documentation of life in the women's quarters in feudal aristocratic Rajasthan. The novel insightfully depicts the day-to-day routine

of a Hindu family of Udaipur. The author has captured the essence of this conservative community by her perceptive observations and delightful details of their lives. Set in the haveli of a traditional Indian extended family, the novel depicts a young bride's growth from the marginal status of a daughter-in-law to the supreme position of the mistress of the household. The novel is not just a portrayal of an orthodox society in which women must justify their presence by upholding the conventions of their ancestors, it also articulates the emerging consciousness of the 'modern' Indian woman caught in the cross-fire of internalized traditional roles and the sighting of new ones, her pains and joys resulting from this transfiguration and her flight from orthodoxy to modernity.

At the centre of the narrative stands Surajmal's haveli, Jiwan Niwas a stately but decrepit structure. Tradition and respect for culture, fondness for rules and regulations that bind society together is an amalgamating feature of this haveli. The women in the haveli are secluded from the mainstream of social life, enclosed by the powerful barrier of the purdah. Like the women in the purdah, the haveli too is "well-enclosed", and there is no way "one can look into the courtyards: the windows are so high that none can look through them".

The purdah is a constant element of everyday life in the haveli. Geeta, the protagonist of the novel, who is brought up and educated in the free and uninhibited environment of Bombay, is constrained to unlearn many things as a bride to conform to the altogether different world of Udaipur. She is inducted into the world of purdah culture the moment she puts her foot on the railway platform of Udaipur:

She was immediately encircled by women singing, but their faces were covered. 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, *Inside the Haveli*, p. 17)

Pari, the senior maid-servant who has almost as much authority as Geeta's mother-in-law, twice repeats the same injunction even before Geeta has stepped into the haveli. "In Udaipur, we keep purdah", she informs Geeta, "Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face". And little later again she reminds Geeta, "Don't ever forget that your head must always remain covered." (p. 18)

Very soon does Geeta discover that behind the purdah is an extremely restrictive lifestyle which is stifling and self-denying. She feels that women were like shadows who "followed their instruction with meticulous care". (p. 21)

In the haveli, there is a maid, Lakshmi, who serves as the other self of Geeta. They resemble, particularly, in their sense of dissatisfaction with the suffocating traditions and the constricting atmosphere of the haveli. But unlike Geeta,

who could not openly voice her discontent and defiance against the hypocrisy and rigidity of the old customs, Lakshmi is full of complaints about her marriage to Ganga Ram, a servant in the haveli. Lakshmi moves about in the haveli with her face uncovered in spite of repeated reminders that she is no longer a child but a married woman. Pained by the unjust accusation of her husband, later on, she leaves not only him, but also their daughter, Sita, as she cannot accept the conventional right of a husband to treat his wife the way he likes. Thus defying the entrenched conventions of patriarchal dominance and the security of the confining walls of the haveli, Lakshmi steps out of her enclosed domestic space towards the domain of freedom, never to return.

Geeta also wants to revolt against the norms and rituals imposed by the feudal system. Quite early in the novel, she seriously considers leaving the haveli and even her husband. In a retort to Ajay, she says, "...I don't even see any point in being here. I may as well go and stay with my parents. You won't miss me..." (p. 54). But Geeta does not leave the haveli. Eight years after her marriage, Geeta, who is by now a mother of three children, is more adjusted to the mores of the haveli than at the beginning. However, she continues to chafe at her existence, though privately:- "There were many times when she felt the crushing weight of the walls that shut off the outside world" (p. 88). When she questions the orthodoxy of the haveli, she is admonished by Dhapu: "There you go again attacking the havelis. Whether you like us or not, it is here that you have to live and the sooner you understand us, the better." (p. 91)

Looking for freedom and some space, Geeta creates a new space for herself in the haveli. Contrary to the dark rooms of the haveli, Geeta makes her room "comfortable and cheerful" with wall hangings and paintings. Geeta asserts her individuality when she decides to send Sita, the daughter of the servants, Ganga Ram and Lakshmi to school, even though she is opposed by Pari, the senior maid, on the grounds that "Udaipur and its customs" do not allow girls to go out of the haveli for they "must be protected from the outside world." (p. 98)

In the haveli, education for girls and women is not perceived as essential for their development. In fact, there was real fear that education would tarnish a girl's reputation, hamper her chances of marriage and make her unfit for married life. Not only is an educated girl perceived as unlikely to make a docile and obedient daughter-in-law, but there is also a suspicion that she would be incompetent to do the simplest of domestic chores. Rama Mehta, in *The Western Educated Hindu Woman*, points out that families feared that educated women would threaten the

harmony of family life by developing personal ambitions and goals. The only role envisaged for girls in the haveli was that of a wife and a mother.

Geeta is filled with a sense of outrage at the rigid society in which women must live uneducated and unenlightened. She is conscious of the reality that education alone could free women from their circumscribed mental world and win for them their social and intellectual freedom. She realises that education alone can open the minds of young women, which could lead them to independence and self-worth. She obtains the permission of her father-in-law, who is, to some extent, open-minded to send Sita to School. Thus, Geeta brings about a change, and this change is metaphorically communicated in the novel:

“Geeta had opened the tiny windows in her room to let in the fresh air and the rays of the morning sun.” (p. 105)

This pattern is repeated in Geeta’s second venture when she begins to hold classes for the poor children and the illiterate women of the havelis. By turning the haveli into a school, Geeta subtly changes her immediate environment and the people concerned.

Although Geeta gets accustomed to the haveli culture, she does not respond to the rigidity with which women hold on to the old and archaic customs. She could never become one with those women. The tension between her and the other women remains. A rather difficult situation occurs for her just before the novel concludes. It concerns the proposal of marriage for her adolescent daughter Vijay from one of the richest families of Udaipur. She is reluctant to see her daughter married so young and without completing her education. It is to her credit that, though she is urged to give her consent to the proposal so that her father-in-law could die in peace, she does not make a compromise or get emotionally blackmailed. Thus, she shows resistance, not rebellion, against the customs.

Rama Mehta, the author herself, though she supported a ‘modern’ outlook as does her young heroine Geeta, was not a votary of the Western concept of individualism, which appeared to her destructive. She favoured change, but a change that would not destroy the very fabric of society. She pointed out in her article that those countries which wanted change were undergoing change but continued to “maintain their way of life” and that change was based on the foundation of their culture. This belief is amply reflected in the character of Geeta. Geeta, as a representative of modernity, has a deep and lasting influence on the timeless traditions of haveli through a slow process of “contact, change and transformation”. She does not attempt to bring a radical transfiguration to those around her, as that would have

an unsettling and devastating effect on society. She firmly believes in integration with her surroundings first and then begins a slow process of transformation.

Rama Mehta tries her best to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, keeping in mind Indian feminism. K.R. Srinivasa Lyengar writes:

“The balance between repose and movement (in *Inside the Haveli*) 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 the verities.” (Iyengar, p. 753)

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