

Asian Resonance

The Element of Tradition and Modernity in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

Abstract

In the novel *Inside the Haveli* Rama Mehta has tried to portray a new kind of feminism which is a wonderful mixture of both tradition and modernity. In her novel women neither lose their honour nor are they prepared to compromise with their self-respect and social rights. The novel seems to prepare a new path leading to a happy and wonderful society in which women will enjoy the equal rights with their male counter parts.

Keywords: Feminism, tradition, modernity, dignity, purdah, institution, girlish, impetuosity, attitude, confrontation, dominance, counterpart.

Introduction

My present paper undertakes the study of Indian feminism as working in accordance with and also against the tradition. The paper strives to differentiate Rama Mehta's concept of feminism as displayed in her novel 'Inside the Haveli' as distinct from the western feminism and also more radical Indian feminism as seen in the works of writers like Shobha Day. Unlike the radical feminists, Mehta, in a unique way, presents a harmonious blending of tradition and modernity in her novel, leading to a new changing world acceptable to both men and women without the sense of losing dignity and self-respect in either of the two.

In her Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Inside the Haveli* Rama Mehta presents the gender issue by presenting women in purdah which is the extreme form of sex role differentiation that provides both separate worlds and symbolic shelter to women. Purdah is a widespread and dominant feature of many societies that seek to maintain a rigid enforcement of obedience to male authority as we have recently seen in the case of Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan. But this system is generally justified as a way of protecting women from rape and seduction, although purdah produces a paradoxical double standard, since women are rendered more mysterious and therefore attractive and more vulnerable to men.

In the novel the figure of the veiled women is indicative of a high class family. The women are not allowed to go to that part of the haveli which is reserved for men. Just after marriage when Geeta, "leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women"(15) comes to her husband's house, she is instructed to adopt the mores and codes of the haveli and to keep her face always covered. She is forced to live by its rigidly enforced codes of behaviour which center on the ritual avoidance of both men and older women through veiling. This is somewhat a new and irritating code of conduct at least for Geeta who hails from an advanced society where such things are beyond imagination. That is why the women of haveli believe, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us."(29) But as we find a harmonious blending of tradition and modernity in Geeta, she, soon, discovers positive aspects of veiling because "this allows her to think while others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them." (23) "There was something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time."(31)

But gradually the life in the haveli begins to have its play on Geeta. She begins to adjust herself to the new circumstances and begins to accept the codes of the haveli. "Looking at the men below she forgot her daily irritations; she felt proud to be the young mistress of the haveli. How could she allow little discomforts to blind her to the great traditions of the family?"(40)

But Geeta is represented as an ordinary Indian traditional girl with all her weaknesses. That is why there are moments in her life when she

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loses her patience and thinks whether she will be finally able to adjust herself to the life of haveli or not. As she says to her husband Ajay Singh:-

I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur; you are all pampered. You lead your lives and think women are mere chattels...In fact, 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; there are hundreds of people to take care of you.(53-54)

But Geeta does not take this destructive step because despite the little discomfiture she faces in the haveli she has not lost her faith in the institution of family and marriage. That is why with the passage of time she begins to realize that to achieve the desired changes, first of all she will have to change herself. As Rama Mehta describes:-

In spite of herself, Geeta, too had changed. She had lost much of her girlish impetuosity; her temper was more subdued. She had gradually forgotten her own carefree girlhood, in which there had been uninhibited laughter and freedom. Though she still kept a little apart, Geeta had become more and more involved in the routine of the household; she accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest. But there were many times when she felt the crushing weight of the walls that shut off the outside world.(87-88)

Like a newly married Indian girl, in due course, Geeta begins to take share in the life in the haveli. As a newly married Indian girl takes some time in adjusting herself to the new environment, Geeta, also, slowly begins to adjust herself in the tradition bound haveli, realizing that she is starting her second innings, her married life, which, in some matters particularly in matters of surroundings and family culture, has nothing to do with the first one, her maiden life:-

She could never share their past. But Geeta, over the years, had come to appreciate their tradition though she could not regret the passing of an era."(114)

Like an ordinary and traditional Indian woman she feels that for the sake of her child she should adjust to the conditions of the haveli. "It is no good living on in the past; for the sake of our children, we must look to the future."(115) Here lies her Indianness where a woman tries to make the best possible sacrifice for the sake of her family and children. Here She does not seem to be a feminist, rather she seems to be a true humanist who believes in human rights of women who have always been deprived of their human rights in the name of family and family honour.

Geeta's attitude towards the existing order is not that of a radical feminist. She has firm faith in the institution of marriage and family. That is why she decides, in spite of her irritation, to compromise and stay in the haveli, but not to lose her dignity and self-respect. Although she knows that it will test her patience. As she herself says,"The change won't come as quickly as you think."(137)

Geeta is not a pampered gild who does not know the importance of family and traditions. Rather she is a wonderful blend of tradition and modernity who, at any cost, keeps the family intact but at the same time struggles and works for the rights and education of girls and succeeds in changing the attitude even of the traditional Ranas. Her success is reflected in the changed attitude of Bhagwat Singh ji when he says:-

I have told Daulat Singhji that under no circumstances would I permit Vijay to be taken out of school. I am against early marriages. Girls must study; they cannot be kept ignorant. (248)

She does succeed not only in bringing some changes in the life of the haveli and in the attitude of its tradition bound inmates but at the same time she also maintains some of its traditions and adjusts herself accordingly:-

I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me a 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)

No doubt, Geeta is unable to escape from the conservative customs of the haveli. But it does not mean blind adherence to the old customs and that is why when time requires Geeta registers her opposition and dissatisfaction. It is apparent from the way she reacts to Daulat Singhji's wife's proposal of Vijay's engagement with her son:-

I have put up with enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend any more. I won't ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child. I know exactly how these things work in this place...You are all a bunch of hypocrites. In order to get the girl you want you make any promise, agree to anything...let me tell you that I don't care what family Vir Singh comes from or how much money he has buried in the ground. I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college. Who knows what he will be like when he is a man? (206)

In Geeta, Rama Mehta has not presented a fictitious character. Rather she is the representative of millions of educated Indian women who like Geeta know the importance of family institution but at the same time they are also aware of their own rights and self-respect. She (educated Indian woman) does not fall a victim to the ages old traditions and customs of the society. She has started realizing her caliber, personality, power and desire to be treated equally with her masculine counterpart but at the same time she is not prepared to break the family. Therefore, if necessary, she is prepared to oppose but mostly in a tempered manner. For, as Dr. N K Ghosh writes:-

...we have to remember that family plays a pivotal role in the Indian scheme of things. The new woman in Indian literature (and with a few exceptions in the society also) does not break the family but dreams to make the family "Home Sweet Home".(9)

This kind of attitude, I would call, is Indian feminism in which woman seeks to achieve her

identity and forcing the society to heed to the voice of the loosely called weaker sex. Consequently not only the society is changing but the attitude of the society is also changing. But this change is slow and steady and therefore progressive. The revolutionary changes that we witnessed in the west were destructive as a result of which Germaine Greer like western feminist thinkers discouraged marriage and discarded the institution of marriage.

We must remember that men and women are like two wheels of the family chariot. The family chariot will run smoothly only when both the wheels will be given equal importance in the scheme of things. In the same way the prosperity of the society and happiness of man himself depends on the woman's happiness. As Dr.Ghosh writes:-

Neither the path of open confrontation nor an uneasy truce but the confidence to move in harmonious unison as co-partner in the power game, without compromising honour and dignity as an individual, ought to be the real goal of woman's emancipation.”(11)

In the novel Geeta does not opt 'the path of open confrontation' when she does not find the things suitable for herself. But she does not surrender either. Rather she chooses the middle path, the golden path, of tempered opposition. She is not only prepared to change herself according to the traditions of the haveli but also brings a change in the inmates of the haveli because she knows that the real happiness lies within the walls of the haveli.

To steer the husband-wife relationship in a proper direction while maintaining her own self-respect and dignity this kind of attitude is needed on the part of a wife. Because if a wife lets her husband to get the upper hand on her, the same old story of male dominance would be repeated. In this way Geeta may be said to be preparing a proper path for the future generations of women which will eventually lead to the making of 'Home, Sweet Home' where the so far loosely called weaker sex will enjoy an equal status with her male counterpart and her voice will be heard.

References

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