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Study of Marginalization of Women in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

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Abstract

In the social structure of this world, there are various forms of people like class, community, caste, religion or gender, suffering from the dominated sensibility of social, political, economical or ethical values but their exploitation has been general in the tendency of common perception. The close observation of these people is categorized under the head of marginalization. Marginalized people are often defined socially, politically, culturally and

legally deprived of their 'rights' as human beings in every sphere of life and cultural society. The various groups of people, living or surviving on the verge, can be assessed with their caste, class, religion or gender differentiations. In this regard, women's position in the society and family has been one of the most considerable issues. The condition of women whether as masters or servants has equally been dominated and deprived of rights in the men dominated society. The present paper explores the marginalization, suppression, deprivation, gender inequality and feminine sensibility of women within the patriarchal system of the society in the novel *Inside the Haveli*.

Keywords: Marginalization, Domination, Suppression, Deprivation, Gender inequality, Feminine sensibility, Patriarchal system

Rama Mehta is one of the most considerable feminine writers who raised the voice of feminine marginality as much as she can do and it can be exemplified well with her Sahitya Akademy Award winning novel, *Inside the Haveli 1977*, a wonderful literary presentation for the social thinkers as well as literal readers. The novel can be read and examined as a realistic account of socio-cultural system, tradition and customs of Udaypur, Rajasthan (the state of kings) in India. It has a detailed account of an educated girl, Geeta, her inner conflict for her social status and quest for identity. The physical structure of the novel is basically divided into four sections, having various experiences of life in the Haveli, the huge palace of livings. The building is experienced as Haveli for the men not women which can be seen everywhere in the novel in the words and opinions of the novelist. This novel of Rama Mehta has been published by Penguin Random. The novel is divided into three sections and twenty nine chapters. The first and the second section are consisted in nine chapters respectively while the last section of the novel is consisted in eleven chapters.

The characterization of the novel is concentrated on feminine sensibility of marginalization which can be seen well in the portrayal of the protagonist, Geeta who was born and brought up in Mumbai, the economic and filmy city of India. She was married in an extremely traditional and conservative Rana's family of Udaipur in the conceptual and contextual background of old Indian culture. After her marriage, it was seen that she was put in the Haveli which has confined all her joys into the four walls of the building and it has also taken away all her freedom and fascination of a freely marital life. Consequently, the protagonist is seen struggling against the traditional and conservative rules and regulations of the Rana's family for her willingness, freedom, fairness and frankness towards her fulfilling desires. She is also seen hither and thither for establishing her own identity through her bearing capacities of sufferings and suppressions, she faces round the clock. The blending personality of old and modern Indian, Geeta is seen too much attached with her husband and children, very devoted lady to her in-laws with her respect and obligation which has created a boundary for her when she wants to bring a change in her personality as well as identity. At the same time she has great desire to bring a change into the consideration of men as well as women for the wellness of feminine society in not only India but also all over the world. The present novel is revolving around the pivot characters, Geeta and her husband Ajay but the

other major characters can also be read in the importance of developing plot and characterization. In this reference, one can know about Sangram Singhji (Grand-father in-law), Bhabha Sa (Grandmother in-law), Bhagawat Singhji (Father in-law), Bhabhi Sa (mother in-law), Vijay (her elder daughter), other relatives Kaki Sa, Bua Sa, Mami Sa, and servants-Gangaram, Khayali (The cook), Pari, Dhapu, Lakshmi, Sita. Her husband, Ajay is rendering his services as a professor of Physics at Udaipur University. Ajay is highly educated that's why he is not looking a staunch follower of traditions but still his sincerity and obligation to his parents compel him to be a silent viewer. Everybody in the family has some good qualities and gentle behaviour except there comes the time of social prestige and family rules and regulations. The discipline of the family is so maintained that no one can dare to challenge the established rules and regulations whether they are traditional or reasonable. Even the ladies in the family have to make compromises with the rules and regulations of the family which makes Geeta unreasonable and unwilling follower of the social practices. Consequently, Geeta's life has become wretched and burdensome in these rules and regulations. When she gets too much upset, she hopes for the betterment of the promises, Ajay has kept for her to leave Udaipur and settle in Delhi and live there freely the life of freedom and enjoyment. For the better understanding of the novel it would be necessary to read and examine the novel with a concise and compact study of its chapters. The setting of the novel is surrounded around Udaipur for more than twelve years as the second section starts after seven while the third section describes the journey of novel after twelve years.

In this connection of the detailed studies of the novel, one can find the first chapter of the first section, depicting Udaipur town the capital state of the State of Mewar known as the 'Old City' for its surroundings and environment but the wall still divides Udaipur into two halves. The west city of Udaipur is bounded by Lake Pichola of which water is not clean because men bathe in it; washermen unload their donkeys and beat the clothes clean on slabs of granite on its shore. The old city is surrounded by high boundary walls having four gates. To the north side of the city one can see the hills of Sajjangarh, covering by a dense forest in which royalty hunted tigers and leopards. It is indicating the old structure of the condition of Rajasthan.

The novel also narrates that there are four gateways, huge with metal spikes on each panel, to the city which were often shut in the night "when the kings of Udaipur were ever ready to meet the invading armies of the Mughal rulers" (ITH, 4). The only main street leads to the palace of the town and others were filled with congested houses and narrow streets. On the both sides of the streets, one can see good shops full of coloured items. Among these narrow streets and congested surroundings with white marbled and stone walled city, one can see the Havelis of Ranas, situated on the crest of a ridge that overlooks Lake Pichola, holding for the courts for four hundred years/ In these gullies, one can also see Sangram Singhji haveli, which was also known as Jeewan Niwas. It was so old that "its first courtyard was built three hundred years ago, and there were only three rooms around it... today the haveli has many courtyards and many rooms" (ITH, 6). The physical structure of the haveli may have no shape from outside but inside there is definite plan for it has its own rules and regulations. Purdah was defining the different sections of the ladies in the haveli but only,

covering their heads with veil, was not enough to hide them from the world. They must be kept in the separate sections and it existed for both, men and women, differently, inside the haveli. Women were allowed to stay only in Zenana section of the haveli and their visiting of male sections in the havelis was not only prohibited but also completely unacceptable. This division of apartments of the haveli and ban on women to enter the apartments of men made Geeta curious to know the reality of the haveli and this curiosity brought her attention to peep into men's apartment, when she was alone in the Zenana, but she was checked out by Dhapu who pacified her curiosity by making her viewing of the men's apartment from the lattice window secretly when there was a celebration in the haveli: "She saw her husband, Ajay Singh, in a white knee-length coat and a red turban, standing beside his father. Father and son had the same clear-cut sculptured features; they looked exactly like the portraits on the wall; they have the same aristocratic faces with piercing eyes" (ITH, 29). There was the splendid gathering of guests who "looked elegant in formal attire with turbans and coats of silk brocade over tight fitting pants. There was a quiet dignity in this gathering. . . Geeta stared at the scene below as if hypnotized" (ITH, 39).

The present condition of Jeewan Niwas has different courtyards and separating sections of male, female and servants: "the separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaypur kept purdah" (ITH, 6). No outsider is allowed to enter the haveli, especially in the women's apartment. Even the men of haveli follow the rules of m etiquette and do not like to stay inside while it is very urgent at day time. The importance of this haveli can be understood in the text: "After all, it is the first time in sixty years that there are four generations together under the roof of the haveli" (ITH, 10). The household of Jeewan Niwas is not complete without the referral services of the servants and maids who live within the premises of haveli. They are looking an indispensable part of haveli as the whole system of the household depends on workers. The marginalization of the servants is described in the novel: "Vijay found Sita a willing slave" (ITH, 96). In this reference, the most senior and responsible of them was Pari Ji who came to haveli at the age of eight years old and working till the day at the age of forty five. In her services, she is fully devoted to the haveli affairs. Geeta, being the bride and newcomers in the family is attended by Dhapu, a young maid in her early thirties. Lakshmi, another maid gets married to Gangaram, "gentle, soft spoken and kind to everyone" (ITH, 11) and gives birth to Sita at an early age of fifteen, presenting the glimpse of child marriage and girl exploitation. In the form of the birth of Sita from Lakshmi and Gangaram and the first sign of the feminine exploitation can be seen when Khyali, admitted "Girls are burden. . . but what can one do once they are born?" (ITH, 8). All of these concepts made Lakshmi upset and she is unable to decide what she should do. At the occasion of the birth of Vijay when Lakshmi leaves haveli for the reason of her prestige and severe beating by her husband, even she has to leave her infant daughter Sita due to not having any shelter for herself and her daughter. This shows the pathetic condition of a woman who wants to live on her own choice and interest.

The routine life in the haveli is tough and Lakshmi, like Pari came to this haveli as a young lady of ten, and she was teased by other servants because she was dark and ugly and that her dowry would have not been heavy. People used to say that Gangaram is good enough

for the haveli and Lakshmi had to listen to all of them but nothing would convince her that cleaning and sweeping was wonderful, that she was fortunate in having Gangaram as her husband. She used to pay attention little at Dhapu who reminded her again and again that she was no longer a child but a married woman. She understands her importance in the life of men in the form of Gangaram and finds it easy and comfortable to give birth a child and get twenty-one days of rest from sweeping and washing, if only women are considered unclean for hazardous work which can be studied in the concept and dimension of marginalization. The day in the haveli is celebrated early in the morning and the servants leave their beds before the sun rise and engage in the household works of cleaning, sweeping, washing, preparing breakfast in the morning and food for the lunch. This continuity is maintained in the haveli till the completion of day meal. In the noon, for a short period of time, everyone can take rest which is followed again by the household affairs till it is time to sleep. In this regard of engagements, the men and the mistress of the haveli have to take care of all the rules and regulations as the mistress takes care of the material to be used in the kitchen while the men have to leave the haveli in the morning and they have to work outdoor handlings and these men came inside the haveli only at the meal time. The mistress has to welcome all the visitors and the guests inside the haveli and she is very keen to be hospitable for them. Through the textual narration, one can notice that there is no table system for meal where each member of family can sit and have meal together. Men are served first for the food and women follow them with their gatherings by the next.

Thus, the story of the novel opens on the thirteenth day of Vijay's birth where the readers know that Geeta is taking rest in her bed, cherishing the solitude after a long while. It is the first chance for her to be left alone to comfort and rest. Pari seems to convince the master and the mistress of the haveli for a grand celebration to be held on a girl's birthday which becomes burning issue of the town because it is unusual to celebrate a girl's birthday in such a huge style and manner. The grandeur of girl's birthday celebration rests on the highly educated parentage of Geeta and Ajay who welcome the girl child very warmly without having any distinction which can be understood the remedial consideration of the novel as well as the novelist.

Rama Mehta, presents an intimate picture of a patriarchal system which existed since feudal times and was not over it even in the modern consideration. It is also exemplified with a revelation of attitudes towards women and their status in a upper section of Indian society where the life behind purdah is considered well educated and cultured. It also pays attention on, how Geeta arranges to be fitted in the most orthodox family in the haveli and at the same time it is the study of metamorphosis which is brought to the haveli by her advent. As a sociological thinker, the novelist has taken sociological approach, "the approach which starts with conviction that the relation of literature to society is vitally important" (Scott, 125) to pen down the stories behind the purdah system of men as well as women. The novel can be read and examined in the sociological as well as conceptual framework of Coser who points out, "fiction provides us with a wealth of sociologically relevant material. Literature, like sociology is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it." (Coser, 3) The story of the novel unfolds the classical clash between

traditional role of orthodoxy and modern thinking of improving conditions and situations of the women 'self' in the two cities of Udaipur and Bombay respectively: "In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli" (ITH, 29).

Further, when Geeta is alone in her private room, she looks outside through the window, visualizing outside looks: floating clouds, natural vegetation and further raining drops. She closes her eyes and seems to be lost in the thoughts how she has been entrapped inside the haveli and lost her freedom for visualizing nature and natural things. She remembers her days of two years before when she was a care free, innocent and college going girl without knowing a life within walls. She used to go to a school and enjoyed college life freely mingling with familiar men and women without having any objection. Even her first meeting with Ajay in the company of her brother was not very surprising for her and she gave her consent for marriage with Ajay without knowing anything properly about him and his family background, "When her father asked her, if she liked the man in the grey suit she had said, "Yes". Her parents seemed sure that she would" (ITH, 15). Geeta looks to have realized closely the predicaments of women's fate when her own mother suggested her: "Keep your head covered, never argue with your elders; respect your mother in-law and do as she tells you. Do not talk too much. (ITH, 16) It was so because her parents were concerning about Ajay's family which was aristocratic family of Udaypur and there were doubts in their minds that how such a girl would learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of women to give her elders the traditional deference. The novelist has presented the idea that her parents "anxiety was not really so much about Geeta's adjustment but about whether a girl like her would be approved by Ajay's parents." (ITH, 16) Thinking all about these, Geeta's eyes has filled with tears as after marriage when she entered the haveli in Udaypur, she encountered the first complicated thing for herself and that was Purdah: "The minute she had put her foot on the platform she was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. One of them came forward and pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror 'where do you come from that you show your face to the world?" (ITH, 17). The critical examine of such Purdah system is called by Jung "psychic empowerment" (Jung, 19) which can be assessed in the words of Jasbir Jain in her article, Erasing the Margins; Questing Purdah: "The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basic of gender ideology" (Jain, 243).

Furthermore, in the Haveli, Geeta observed each and everything with her examining eyes through which she noticed that the women always kept their heads covered with veil, even in the absence of men. This awful system of purdah breaks her heart and fascination of falsified relationship to be married in a royal family where she feels suffocated. The most interesting point of the novel at the time is, that Pari is making her acquaintance with the different buildings of the in-laws but she does not keep Geeta see these buildings closely and openly which creates not only satire but humour also. Tabassum F. Sheikh very aptly states that "Purdah is a customary practice initiated by men and it is responsible for the sub ordinate

role of muslim women in the family. Moreover, they are of the opinion that, in general, purdah is the root cause of the backwardness of the Muslim community” (Sheikh, 154). Behind this Purdah system of India, there is a message for women: “Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.” (ITH, 17) either men or women could become strangers to one another. Even the maid servant like Pari is instructing Geeta: “Don’t ever forget that head must always remain covered” (ITH, 18).

Purdah system is so powerful in the Haveli that even Laxmi, a maid–servant, is rebuked for not following the trend of a cultured or havelian society: “Look at you with face uncovered” (ITH, 10). She wants to complain against the torture of her husband but in the opinion of the elders in the Haveli, her husband is authorized to abuse her or beat her. Geeta hates this ‘purdah taboo’ and always try to persuade others to get rid of the hidden problems of this covering system. In this regard of the concern, one can read Leigh Minturn who analyzes “the tradition of purdah in Rajput families and the manner in which it restricts interaction of wives with their husband and other members of their husband’s household. These restrictions are designed to ensure that the alliance between husband and wife is subordinated to the alliance of men with their consanguineous kinsmen” (Minturn 45– 46).

In this way, one can say that women, in India, have been as the silent sufferer and upholder of the traditional values of family as well as society. Geeta as well as many women found this purdah system totally against women’s liberty and also as a root cause of their sufferings in their personal life. In this novel, Geeta noticed that women always kept their head covered even in the absence of men that’s why purdah had become a symbol of tradition and prestige that had to be followed in any condition by the women in the haveli. Purdah had become a symbol of respect to elders that means for women keeping silence and obeying them without questioning anything about: “They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command: women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care” (ITH, 21). Even in a women’s gathering, Geeta was instructed to abstain from speaking and she must bent down to touch the feet of the elders whether they were a hundred women. Thus, one can see that she was treated as a doll, laden with heavy jewellery and fancy saris to be covered completely without speaking frankly. It shows that a girl’s activeness, free thinking and enjoying the company of her fellows are completely banned after marriage.

Family means to live among human beings, to converse each and every matter with all the members living all around and get a pleasurable company for all of them but in this haveli, for all that Geeta, had no direct conversation with her grand-father in-law and father in-law, even after two years of her marriage: “All she had to do to shake or nod her head demurely; the questions to her were answered by her mother-in-law” (ITH, 22-23). Thus, Geeta had never spoken a word to them which also creates a gap of communication and generates odd sentiments and feelings towards the members of the family. Their feeling of kinship and dearness never takes place between the elder males in the family and younger daughter in-laws. The family is known for its bond of love and affection but this haveli has segregation for both men and women and one can studies deeply, it were women who were confined behind the big doors of the haveli. Their appearance and movement were restricted forcefully which can be categorized under the discourse of hegemony works. The restrictions

on the women were not limited to the daughters in laws only but the young girls of the haveli were also brought up tightly teaching them the lesson of discipline and courtesy. This continuity of the patriarchy for the domination of women has been concerning matter in the development of civilization from generation to generation and different strategies were applied for continuing it. The girls were married off in their childhood for saving money and status. Marrying the girls at a tender age killed all of the possibilities for protest. Shifting from one house to another with so many rituals and perceptions for these young married girls also maintain a psychological pressure on them and it can be read when Pari tells Lakshmi, “We all have to accept fate. There is no escape from that. (ITH, 12) and really, if they try to escape from they could be tortured in another form of patriarchy which can be reflected in the consideration of widow, Pari: “I was a child when I came to this haveli and your grandmother-in-law trained me...then, once I became a widow, she would not let me put on coloured saris or bangles like the other girls. I don't know what colours a widow can put on in your part of India but in Udaipur we can only wear grey or black” (ITH, 23).

The feminine life after marriage at a tender age is very difficult and complex, full of responsibilities and restrictions because in such conditions the childhood and teen years that should be spent playing carefree, maturing the mind, knowing the world, are burdened with so many responsibilities and restrictions that they have to sacrifice themselves. Early marriages also resulted in teen pregnancies, deeply affected the health of such ladies. And this chain of suffering went on. The girls were objected forcefully and prohibited from going outside, getting education and were confined within household premises. The custom of this patriarchy is continued as Pari said: “To be young is dangerous” (ITH, 23) in the consideration of another form of brutality in this male dominated society. The reason behind such objection was given of their safety and fear of any future miss-happenings that may cause for their bad reputation for marriage. That's why most of the female characters in the novel had been married off in their childhood whether it is Bhagbat Singh Ji's wife, Pari, Dhapu, Lakshmi, or Sita. The child marriage, in the cases of servants and maids, was used as a tool of colonization first and exploitation after their settlement in the haveli. Geeta tried her best to delay the marriage of Sita at an early age but ultimately she compels to accept it .But when the talk about her daughter Vijay's marriage is circulated in the Haveli, she gets angry and reacts fiercely and denies any fact to accept. She goes against her in-laws and also her husband. They are seen to convince her as prolonging the marriage till Vijay would complete her studies. Geeta gives her consent for Vijay's marriage at last when she finds herself convinced in the matter of Vijay's would be husband after meeting him. Her father in-law's appeal for Vijay's marriage at his last time and the condition accepted by Vijay's in-laws that the marriage will be held after the completion of Vijay' study make Geeta think deliberately.

The surprising facts and the most controversial thing in the novel can be taken as one former victim took another without any objection for the reformation in the standard of the girls as well as women and even the exploitation inside the Haveli was handled out by the elderly women. They were playing the role of an active administrator and all types of social and cultural bondages were thrust upon them with the help of these women. The deep study of the novel tells its readers that not only the mistress was involved in this chain of

exploitation but also maids tried their best to handle out social practices among younger ones. Surprising element in the novel is taken by the novelist in the consideration that all of them had to pass through such social and familial restrictions but no one dared to protest against such complexities of women life. Consequently, this illusionary social milieu was taken for granted generation by generation.

Search for identity has also been the basic concept in the traditional as well as professional world of interpretation and the present novel is no exception of it. When Geeta finds herself being unable to move to Delhi, she starts to give air to her ideas and starts teaching the children and maids of the haveli. Though it was protested openly by other havelis, Geeta did not stop it as her father in law and husband also supported her. This search for identity in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: “the woman’s quest for self–definition the underlying plot of nineteenth century writing by women” (Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 76) is a central concept for the contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which is read and examined along with Elaine Showalter who sees ‘self– discovery’ or ‘a search for identity’ (Showalter, 13) as the main theme of women’s literature since 1920’s. This novel also presents the story of the protagonist Geeta’s identity–crisis in the cross–cultural area of content which can be reflected in her, being brought up in Bombay, she as the independent young woman struggles to assimilate with her modern identity in a traditional world of Udaipur, where she is married. Such criteria of study project the novel as a journey to find woman space in the traditional society and to establish her authentic identity. So, the novel can be read with mind-boggling variety of themes as well as styles of presentation in the feminine sensibility of marginalization. Geeta, as a studious protagonist displays a disgruntled self which is looking at war with the patriarchal and conventional society of the haveli. After observing and examining all the incidents in the haveli, Geeta tried to speak in a distinctively personal voice, among the members of the collective voice by asserting the autonomy of women.

Vijayalakshmi Seshadri seems very apt when she says: “With the new women’s writing starting in the 1970s, the conventional plot of the novel was replaced by the quest of the new heroine” (Seshadri, 60), especially in the reference of this novel. The topic of self-exploration, pervading the entire production of the contemporary women’s writing, gives the heroine of this novel a questing for self status by liberating herself from all the mythological and constraining stereotypical rules and regulations of the existed haveli. In this series of concern, one must understand the patriarchal concept and dimension of Uma Chakrawati in her Patriarchy where she has stated that women are seen as irredeemably weak, feckless and over– promiscuous: “The social structure and practice of language itself naturalize notions of appropriate and inappropriate female behavior. A society lives by to be constructed rather than given and clearly authorized by systems of patriarchal powers” (Chakrawati, 134). Social structure of the tradition and culture or the patriarchal system of this haveli postulates an inside/outside dichotomy on gender biases. In the title of *Inside the Haveli*, this ‘Inside’ is assigned well for only women, as women have no space in ‘Outside’ society of joy and pleasure while the men can move anywhere for not only joy and pleasure but also to establish their own identity into the various fields of traditions and professions. This conflict between

inside and outside world of women is studied and quoted by V. Geetha: “The inside/outside separates women and men, assigning women to the inside of homes, cultures – and men to the outer world, of labor, production and rule... and the outside is often a form for the exercise of local patriarchal authority... the home and hearth are conceptualized in folk, popular and much of literary” (Geetha, 144).

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