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Research Article

Women and (Unpredicted Appreciation With) Historical Tradition in Rama Mehta's 'Inside the Haveli'

Shankar H. Bhoir

Assistant Professor,

GES's Arts, Commerce & Science College, Shreevardhan, Maharashtra, India.

Introduction

Generally it is said, history repeats itself. History, as, in The Handbook of Historical Linguistics, Brian Joseph explains from Greek, historia, meaning "inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation" (Joseph: 2004; 163) is the study of the past, particularly how it relates to humans. It is an umbrella term that relates to past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation, and interpretation of information about these events.

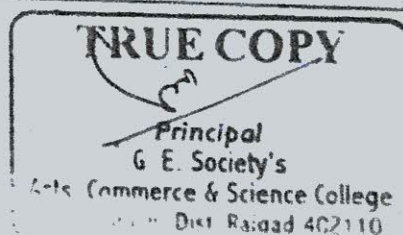
History can also refer to the academic discipline which uses a narrative to examine and analyze a sequence of past events, and objectively determine the patterns of cause and effect that determine them. (Evans: 2001 and Munslow: 2001). Historians sometimes debate the nature of history and its usefulness by discussing the study of the discipline as an end in itself and as a way of providing "perspective" on the problems of the present. (Tosh: 2006 & Nash: 2000)

Historical criticism explores the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding the creation and reception of a work of literature; it uses history as a means of understanding a literary work more clearly. Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. Two premises of historical criticism are that the social, political, and cultural contexts (the historical influences) affect the creation of works of literature and that the meaning of literature changes over time as these same contexts change. Historical criticism examines both the time period within the story and the time period in

which the story was written. We can hardly understand characters' lives without some sense of the time and place in which they lived, and we can hardly understand the author's purpose without understanding the cultural norms and events during the writing of the work.

Rama Mehta's, the Sahitya Akademi Award recipient novel, Inside the Haveli (1977) presents the account of the central character, Geeta, who is married to a conservative and traditional family and she abruptly finds herself existing in Purdah in her husband's ancestral Haveli of Udaipur, named, Jiwan Niwas. Geeta brought up in Bombay (Mumbai) as a self-governing young woman, sophisticated with boys, absolutely as a modern youngster. But after marriage she struggles to preserve her contemporary identity in a customary world of the Haveli. The (historical) traditions of Haveli was absolutely dissimilar than she expected at the time of marriage. Her journey starts in Physical manner when she moves to Udaipur by train after getting married to Ajay, an educated science Professor. There is also a movement from present to past and past to present which occurs in the mind of Geeta. Inside the Haveli presents an intimate picture of historical traditional culture which existed since feudal times and is a revelation of attitudes towards the new coming members especially women and their status in a certain section of Indian society.

**Corresponding author.
E-mail address:
(Shankar H. Bhoir)
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The novel also highlights the concern of women towards such (unpredicted) traditional values and social costumes, which turn into essential to accept and to follow. These essentials made complete contradiction in nature and status of women. The novel concludes with the women's unpredicted appreciation of the traditions. The present paper highlights the issues which create forceful, unnecessary and unexpected alterations in women's life.

While explaining the tradition, Mehta has taken sociological approach, "the approach which starts with conviction that the relation of literature to society is vitally important" (Scott: 125). As Coser 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) It unfolds the classical clash between tradition and modernity. The two cities, Udaipur and Bombay in *Inside the Haveli* stand for historical tradition and the modernity, respectively. It explains as:

"In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli" (Mehta: 1977; 29).

As Uma Chakrawati has pointed out that in Patriarchy:

"...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: Patriarchy; 134)

As the title, *Inside the Haveli* denotes, traditionally, this 'Inside' is assigned only to women, as women have no space in 'Outside' society. As V. Geetha notes:

"The inside/outside dyad 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. Culture- as an essentially 'feminine' space, whereas the outer world of commerce, rule and war is seen as a 'man's world'. Words in most Indian languages designate the

woman as the queen of the household, its guardian angel, its custodian and so on, whereas a man is described as the one that brings in an income, as a protector and guardian of the hearth in his capacity as a public figure and as one who fashions the world, makes history." (Geetha: Patriarchy: Theorizing Feminism; 144-45)

Before getting married, Geeta is given an advice by her mother whom she learns in her historical traditional life that:

"Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much." (Mehta; 16)

The menace of Purdah system which was followed as a traditional bounding in Rajasthan, Geeta came across this situation when she lands at the place of Udaipur. It introduced her by maids,

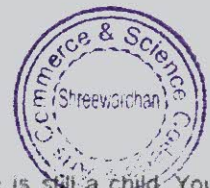
[When] Geeta had lifted her face and pulled the sari back to see. "No, no, you cannot do that," Pari had snapped, pulling back the sari over her face. "In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face." (Mehta; 17)

According to Jung, the veil and Purdah are regarded as features of 'psychic empowerment' (Jung: 1987; 19). Jasbir Jain in her article erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah states that:

"The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology." (Jain: 1996; 243)

Traditionally, Haveli women were not allowed to enter openly at the premises from their compartments. They were restricted to have any open communications with the elders, including their own husbands. They were restricted to have any concern with the matters of men in the Haveli. As Geeta and her maid went to see the men's meeting compartment, Pari said...The males conduct their business from their own separate apartments and their visits are announced beforehand.

The following quotation is a typical descriptions of historical traditional restrictions



imposed by the complex customs (of purdah) on Rajput women of that time.

"My father-in-law never heard my voice. My husband never saw my face. I never saw the gate to my husband's house." (Quotation recorded in 1954, Leigh Minturn; 73)

Geeta feels herself like other women of Haveli. Her emotions on the traditional customs expressed as she feels:

"Women behind thick walls had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed-up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show. Women of the upper classes did not talk in the streets." (Mehta; 110)

Historically, in the Aristocratic family, the celebration was only the concern of the male community, and was celebrated with giving gifts to the servants of the Haveli. So, when her own daughter's birth was celebrated, Geeta has to sit in a corner with her face covered. On the other hand, the daughter of servant (Lakshmi), Sita's birth was remained without celebration. The mother of the child also was restricted of showing affection towards her newborn daughter (Vijay) publicly. She bursts out on rejecting traditions when she reminded by Dhapu, as:

"Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here...I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don't tell me what I should do with my own child!" (Mehta; 32)

Historically, giving education for a servant girl was very bold decision. But in Inside the Haveli, Geeta decides to send Sita, exactly of Vijay's age, to school. While all the servants, maids and her mother-in-law criticize her for this decision. According to them, the Haveli culture requires total and unquestioned submission to its rules and conventions, so the women are kept enclosed within the gigantic walls.

Elder's decisions, Childhood/early marriage, and especially within the relationship is a historical tradition. When Daulat Singh's wife gives a proposal to the mistress of Jeewan Niwas for the marriage of Vijay (just thirteen years old) with her grandson Vir Singh, Geeta bursts out on Ajay:

"I have put 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. You are all a bunch of hypocrites. My daughter's marriage is my concern, I will never agree to Vijay's engagement like this, no matter what happens. Even if it were the son of Maharana of Udaipur, I wouldn't agree." (Mehta, 171)

But Historical tradition has great importance and value in Indian culture. Even though, all sorts of rejection by the modern concern, tradition and humanly concern always has the upper position in Indian subcontinent. The elder persons and their decisions were always respected. So, whether Geeta was against of all the traditional values, but in the latter part, she changed her mind towards the acceptance of the same historical traditions. As her mother-in-law says on the classes started by Geeta:

"How dare anyone say a word against the Haveli, these classes are not worth continuing. I will stop the girls from coming." And Geeta replies to her mother-in-law as:

"Bhabhi, it's my entire fault; please, forgive me. I should never have permitted the girls to join the classes; from tomorrow, I will tell them not to come" (Mehta; 170).

Again she declares to herself:

"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." (Mehta; 170)

Her feeling arrogance and rebellion spirit are humbled by Bhagwat Singh's emotional appeal to her:

"Binniji, I have been agitated for the last few weeks; I have looked at the proposal from every angle. I am still not quite sure whether it is right to engage a girl as you as our Vijay. But a girl has to marry, if not today, then tomorrow" (Mehta; 247).

Finally, her father-in-law's death in illness makes it clear to her about the responsibility as the mistress of the Haveli. As her mother-in-law explain:

"Don't cry my child, your father-in-law lived honourable. He has gone, leaving you the mistress of this house. If you loved him, you will keep this Haveli as a trust for your



children. He did his duty by us all. Now it is your turn. Don't weep. If you don't show strength now, to whom shall I look for comfort? You are all I have; everything else has gone." (Mehta; 264)

Geeta's primary trepidation and apprehension towards parents-in-law, turns into respect and commitment and she finds consideration, affectionate, flexible and accommodative. All her resistance gives way and she finds herself a willing prisoner in the Haveli when they give Ajay and Geeta permission to shift to Delhi if they wish to do so. In the words of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar,

"In the end, she becomes the mistress of the Haveli, feeling a pride in what is best in the family tradition and trying in other respects to make the Haveli community of relations and dependent move with the times, making sure of each forward step" (Iyengar: 1984;213).

Conclusion

It will conclude with the views that, historical traditional issues like women, religion, purdah, issue of dowry, issue of girl child and childhood marriage are taken up in this novel with great concern. This novel echoes the voice of protest at various levels, especially through the women characters. Geeta's strategy is negotiation, not transmutation. All the traditions around her in the Haveli are excused at the beginning because of ingenuous. All were customary traditions so it was accepted by Geeta. But the crises arise when these historical and customary traditions became restrictions in the progress in modern sense. These traditions become burden in terms of acceptance, according to Geeta, because she protests it. But as the story runs, her protest slowly (or can be said forcefully, unpredictly, powerfully or setting emotional burden) turns into accepting these traditional cultures. At the end her sense of tradition is transformed a bit from within. She takes over the voice of tradition by the end. Geeta changes tradition and her vision as well. She makes it a living in a lively structure. She has walked through a journey of protest, gradual transformations and a matured acceptance of reality. Her sense of adjustment is from both within herself and among the Haveli people.

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