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### **Subdued Voices: Women Characters and their Author in *Inside the Haveli***

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#### **Abstract**

Rama Mehta is an eminent novelist who contributed significantly to Indian English fiction by bringing female issues to the fore through her exemplary novel, *Inside the Haveli*. The novel shows a predominant concern with the subjugating condition of women characters shackled in the Indian patriarchal structure and brings, particularly, into light the repressed state of female characters and the elements that determine their submission. Simultaneously, based on the incident, the novel reveals silence and submission on the part of the novelist as well. Nevertheless, the work seems stifled when dealing with women's issues; its movements are confusing, contradicting and oscillating. The characters and their author appear tense under pressure showing a disinclination to adopt a bold stance. This cramped and oscillating situation speaks of their helplessness and repressed situation.

**Keywords:** Silence, Subjugation, Sublimation, Defiance, Devious Ways, Freedom, Self-Assertion, Male-Domination, Voices

*Inside the Haveli*, published in 1977, is a realistic piece by Rama Mehta. The novel reveals inconvenience and hesitation experienced by a young, educated Mumbai girl who comes to live in her husband's orthodox Haveli after marriage and it ends with a message that with a complete sense of understanding, tolerance, patience, sacrifice and adjustment, one can overcome difficulties and become the part of a family lineage.

The novel exhibits remarkable craftsmanship by mingling simplicity with complex and myriad undercurrents. First, it offers a luminous picture of a woman, rooted in Indian tradition and customs- signifying gentleness, compassion and chivalry, and that despite education and the influence of the Western culture, the Indians can retain their traditions and beliefs. In support of the views expressed in her book, *The Western Hindu Woman* (published in 1970), the novel portrays the scuffle of a young woman against her surroundings wherein, with persistent resolution and dignity, she instils some changes without disturbing the established order. Secondly, it offers a very complex tale of male domination and the subordination of women. It depicts judiciously the picture of female suppression and the methods used to overcome such suppression.

The novel is generally considered conservative in its espousal of traditional values, but in fact, "it tells a story of woman's liberation. Specifically, it describes a woman's escape from the prison-house of a bad marriage and subsequent attempts to achieve independence." (TMWITA p. 80) Hence, the theme of Geeta's conformity to tradition becomes superficial when the story of Geeta is being subverted by the inundated battle represented by the excruciating story of Laxmi. Through the interplay of submission and defiance, the novel represents a powerful mode of women's expression for resisting patriarchal power.

To this end, the novel maintains a dichotomy between the main and the sub-plot and between the characters. The structural duality enables the novelist to uncover the patriarchal hegemony rooted in Indian society. The subplot dealing with the story of Laxmi overshadows the main plot dealing with Geeta, making the story more obscure and beguiling. Simultaneously, the novel maintains contrast between the characters Geeta and Laxmi. Geeta, who is modest, calm, rational represents submissiveness, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, chastity, and reticence whereas; Laxmi is poor, ugly, defiant, coarse, and unfriendly, dissatisfied and stands for irrationality, fiendishness and individuality.

### **Geeta's Domestication**

The tale of subjugation and domestication of Geeta surfaces from the beginning when she learns to adjust to the circumstances around her. Despite her metropolitan upbringing, she shows very little dissatisfaction and tries to manage everything patiently. At Udaipur, Geeta follows strictly the solemn and authoritative instructions of dos and dons as she is reminded of the concern of the Haveli's reputation. That includes paying attention to unbearable etiquettes like covering the face or touching the feet of the senior women during festivities. She finds it difficult, but "like a log of wood", she performs those activities.

The restraining and the unfamiliar atmosphere of the Haveli make Geeta confused and terrified. It makes her lose her impetuosity and subdue her temper. Amidst such an atmosphere, she feels incompetent, bewildered and full of fear of making mistakes. She feels anxious and clumsy during gatherings and celebrations. The muggy atmosphere of the Haveli

develops reticence, which results in her loss of enthusiasm. Upon treated as ‘other’, she feels segregated and oppressed. The constant taunts and the humiliation about her modesty and upbringing make her feel disheartened.

The cage like Haveli imprisons her youthfulness. Its vicious grip and the rigorous confinement make her to long for freedom. She feels helpless in the constricted atmosphere; her face shows frustration and a desire to escape. She becomes restless when her companion Dhapu is not seen around. Geeta feels fatigued inside the damp and dingy rooms, which keep her mind and spirit blocked. Her reflections on the outside world are evocative which express the yearning of a stifled soul. She glances at the glittering world and finds it lively and enthusiastic. The scene of strolling women and the arrangements of the hawkers mesmerize her mind. She longs for the freedom being enjoyed by the women of the lower and the middle class.

Despite a few disquietudes, Geeta becomes accustomed to the conservative Haveli culture as the years pass by. Except for a few advances, she appears to steer the Haveli culture further. Regardless that Geeta brings about a potential change in the conservative society; the change that takes over her is far- outweighing. Hence, the development of the story verges on both the emancipation and the domestication of an educated girl brought up in Indian orthodox society.

Given the metropolitan middle-class -background, it is utterly unimaginable that an educated woman like Geeta could be domesticated so slyly and silently. What is it that holds her back and makes her cling to the rigid tradition? Regardless of how much sacrifice an individual makes in situations specific and inevitable, the amount to which Geeta sacrifices is in excess. She succumbs to it without any protest or strong dissatisfaction. There is unwillingness, reticence, slight protestation, marks of frustration and dissatisfaction but no sign of gigantic resistance, which could shake the foundation of the established tradition.

Born in a middle-class society, including her family, she shows a tremendous fascination for the aristocratic way of life. Her heart glows with pride when she glimpses the male-privileged world through the lattice window. The romantic world, full of formalities, fills up her heart initially. The financial background, servants, festivities and ceremonies create a pleasant and amiable atmosphere in the Haveli and help Geeta forget her temporary dissatisfactions. The loving company of her husband Ajay and the maid-servant Dhapu provide tremendous support and oblige her to surrender to the aristocratic way of life. However, it falls short when it comes to satisfying her emotional or intellectual needs.

In a strict society like this, when a woman like Geeta fails to resist the tyrannical patriarchal authorities, she seeks more reliable ways than merely defiant. She represses her voice and fights her battle by choosing covert ways. By adopting a suitable vocation and propagating new ideas in the conservative society, Geeta imparts significance to her life. That includes running classes for the servant’s children and other such initiatives. Her decision of sending Laxmi’s child Sita to school is a revolutionary step in itself. Despite hurdles, Geeta brings about the metamorphosis in the Haveli culture by introducing such changes.

The initiative becomes a kind of atonement for the sacrifice of her wishes and aspirations. It enables her to forsake her freedom and start making adjustments within the

confinement and creatively to transfer the emotions on some other aspects like the education of Sita and other children of the Haveli. She finds out smoother ways and means to prevail over the circumstances and to transfer her wishes and aspirations.

It is a giant and revolutionary step towards freedom and emancipation in the life of both the society and Geeta. Adapting to such a profession and almost identifying herself to it forms a milestone in the empowerment process. Simultaneously, the vocation allows her to assert and thus to sublimate her wishes and aspirations. The self-chosen vocation imparts confidence, which leads her to say no to the marriage proposal from a conservative family for her daughter at an early age. This instance becomes a mark of her resistance to the tyrannies of the orthodox culture.

### **Defiance, Disobedience and Downfall**

Of the minor characters, the character of Laxmi, a maidservant, occupies an important role and her story almost forms the subplot in the novel. Like Pari, she was handed down to the family at an early age as she was black and ugly, and her father could not have fetched the dowry for the marriage. She remained a strange child from her childhood who played for hours and would turn grumpy when asked to do some work. The mistress of the Haveli was very kind who found a match in the form of Gangaram, but Laxmi never liked him as he was poor, mild and had a punk nose. She did not like children making fun of him; it made her full of discomfort. She would always stay alone in her small, dark and damp room. She liked to indulge in her world and avoided mixing with the other women instantly.

She is not a docile woman to be pleased or tamed easily. Her snap opinions on the members of the Haveli make the fellow servants uneasy about her. She does not like the chattering of other women. Even when exhorted by the other fellow women for being defiant and direct, she could not repress her emotions. The instance of coming late of Sarju for massaging the baby is a fine example. Laxmi loses her temper and expresses grunt as Sarju had to spend some time with the mistress of the Haveli, keeping Laxmi wait for a long time. She speaks sarcastically with Sarju, "I hope you have made sure that you will get gold bangles on this occasion, and then at least my lying here in pain would have served a purpose." (ITH p. 14) The snap judgments like this always land her into trouble.

An unfortunate incident leads Laxmi to tragic misfortune. Heeralal, the driver throws at her a wrapped packet, which she brings in her room without giving a second thought to it. Her husband becomes furious, beats her severely and accuses her of infidelity. She disappears from the Haveli the same night, leaving her small daughter behind, as she could not bear the blame and humiliation. She fails to stoop down, takes a radical step and shows resistance to the pain caused by the insults. She embraces unrespectable life and avoids succumbing to the advancement of subjugation. Unlike Geeta, who is moderate, she is hard to be domesticated. From the beginning, Laxmi's sensitive, rebellious, self-centred nature and the miserable conditions around her fail to comfort her. The extreme unsympathetic childhood conditions do not provide her with the scope to either overcome or transform her emotions and experiences into positive energy. The attitude to never stoop down or surrender to the authority proves to be hazardous and leads her to take a radical step in her life.

The episode of Laxmi shows the victimization of women under male supremacy and

authority. It shows how unsympathetic society is towards women who are highly emotional and individualistic. It tries to prove the ultimate power of the patriarchy to which women have to surrender to avoid unending suffering. While describing the patriarchal system, Ania Loomba observes, “While women and gender are seen emblematic of culture and nation... a woman who broke the code of silence and subservience became the object of extreme hostility, which in some cases, succeeded in silencing the outspoken women... The more feminist research recovers and re-interprets the lives of women under colonial rule, the clearer it becomes that women, as individuals and a potential collectivity, constituted a threat and were thus at least partially the target of earlier patriarchal re-writings of tradition” (Loomba p. 186).

Laxmi invites her tragedy as she fails to repress her anger and hatred against the authority represented by the Haveli and its traditions. She refuses to submit to the authority, as it deprives her of freedom and self-assertion. She neither accepts slavery nor learns tricks to overcome and endure the pressure. She preserves her taste and temperament, remains straightforward and never attempts to please the masters even in extreme situations. Like Miltonic Satan, she is ready to face any consequences; she prefers to be the master in hell to a servant in heaven. Her deserting the Haveli is suggestive of the emotional outburst of the mind that suffered for a long. She represents the repressed voices of women subjugated in all walks of their life.

### **Subjugation and assimilation**

Pari is a devout maidservant. She is a hard worker who secures a special place in the family and earns equal respect. She comes into the service as her father was unable to support the family due to famine. She is a widow from her childhood and has served the family for fifty years, forsaking her interest or happiness. She knows all about the customs and rituals followed in the Haveli. The new daughters in law look to her for guidance and follow her instructions.

Regardless of the respectable position in the family, the price Pari has paid for it is far outweighing. The price she pays due to poverty and her gender is finely narrated in the following passage. “I had to be up in winter or summer at four in the morning, and she kept me busy the whole day. Then once I became a widow, she could not let me put on coloured saris or bangles like other girls...” (ITH p.23) While describing her situation, she says, “I was too busy to think of things like happiness. By the evening I was so tired that I slept like a child.” (ITH p. 23)

Devoid of freedom, happiness and wishes or aspirations, she leads a meaningless life of a slave. The patriarchal dominance and the pathetic conditions crush off her life. Despite this, she does not show defiance or even the slightest murmur against the domination. Paradoxically, when she earns the deference suggests that she has become the embodiment of the same system. She dissolves up with it and begins to assert the system than her individuality. Her claims show the demands of patriarchal authority, making her the symbol of rigid patriarchy.

### **The Voice behind the characters**

The novel is realistic and adopts a dialectical approach to the central issue of the status of

women in Indian society. It commingles beguiling motives behind its apparent simplicity and modesty. On the subtler level, it shows conformity to the dominant patriarchal power, and at the deeper, attempts to undermine and ridicule it. It exhibits a double and explicit purpose. It endeavours to glorify the dominant tradition and undermines it by representing some undercurrents.

The story of Geeta and the story of Laxmi run contrary and serve the purpose of duality. Geeta, a moderate and educated woman, is shown to conform to the authority despite her economic and educational background, while Laxmi, an illiterate and irrational girl, is shown to react to her dominance. The schematic formula foretells the repressive state of the author, which has enabled her to hide her real object behind the writing. By showing conformity to tradition through an educated character like Geeta, the novelist has tried to please contemporary authority. On the other hand, the character of Laxmi helps Rama Mehta to express her intense rage and hatred against the conservative society, which reduces women to unfortunate or drastic situations.

The obscure tale of Laxmi helps her to defy the authority slyly. Her prime object is not to represent a complacent story based on an outward facade but to make the reader feel the agony, frustration, sorrows and sufferings encountered by women in their lives. The pitiable tale of Laxmi helps to bring out the frustration and the angst against the indifferent patriarchal hegemony. Laxmi's advent of embracing unrespectable life is suggestive of her contradictory revenge upon the rigid society.

Thus, the women characters and their author show beguiling acts or obscure battles against the hegemonic power structure that represses or obliterates their perspectives. Their means to fight these battles are covert, disguising, disruptive, subversive, semiotic or sublimating. Concerning this view, Michel Foucault aptly remarks, "What is remarkable about the artistic expression of the women in these cases is that they manipulate typically masculine concepts, categories and practices for their productive ends. In so doing, they both buttress and subvert the power structures that perpetuate their position of social subordination. This complicates the popular conception of contemporary scholarship that women's experience forms a kind of subordinated and subjugated knowledge" (Foucault p. 198).

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