



**SUBJECT, SUBJECTIVITY & AGENCY: DECONSTRUCTING THE GENDER MATRIX IN RAMA  
MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI***

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**ABSTRACT**

Feminism is not a clichéd term. Though with so many writings on women issues we find this topic very redundant but as a reader we forget the importance of subject, subjectivity and agency. This is where the idea of this paper rests. By analyzing these paradigms this paper will unfold the gender matrix structured by Rama Mehta in her novel *Inside the Haveli*. The novel is not only a voice a Geeta but it voices the plight of every woman caught in the maze of social dichotomy.

**Key Words**

Subject, Subjectivity, Agency, Deconstruction, Gender Matrix, Social Dichotomy

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**INTRODUCTION**

The matrix of gender that constructs everyday life is spatialized, and women are both actively and passively influenced by space in their constructions of identity. The coincidence of material, symbolic and discursive constructions of space influence and determine the gendered construction of space. This paper problematizes concepts of female subject, subjectivity & agency in relation to the inside/outside, private/public, female/male dichotomy.

A recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979, *Inside the Haveli* portrays the life and experience of the people associated with the haveli in Rajasthan. Here the haveli is projected as an archetype of Rajasthan's way of living. The novelist herself being a Rajasthani woman, stands witness for the ways and experiences of these havelis. The novel is about the blurring of Geeta's identity in the cross cultural gender matrix. From an independent young woman from Bombay to the traditional walls of the haveli as Binniji, the novel presents a journey to find her real space & identity in the society.

The self-reflect is one of the major traits of postmodern feminists. The novel is a skillful woven autobiography as there is a close parallel between the sociologist-cum-novelist Rama Mehta and the protagonist Geeta. After her schooling from Nainital and college from St. Stephen's college, Delhi she has been selected in Indian Foreign Service. This achievement followed her marriage with Shree Jagat Mehtaa, a fellow IFS officer for which she sacrificed her career. Their house in Udaipur is known by the name Jeevan Nivas where she has been looked after by two maids Pari and Duppa. She has also given birth to a girl child who is also named Vijay. All this reflects that there is a very close parallel between Rama and Geeta.

The subjectivity of Geeta against the gender disparity and her confrontation with the agency (both individual and collective) remains the crux of her radical deconstruction of gender matrix. The novel is not only about Geeta's journey from the margin to the center but it is also about reestablishing the new roles of the age old social matrix. Though Mehta has given a complete picture

of the aristocratic haveli but she particularly focuses her constant attention on the women's niche.

Though the novel actually appears to be all women novel and dominated by them yet in the reality it is the man rule and command the house. The presence of women is only restricted to the body the ideas and opinions are always man's forte. In the very first day the women of haveli remarked, "She will never adjust. She is not one of us".

The gender issues are presented in the novel with care and accuracy. Most of the time, the story is narrated from woman's perspective. It is important to know that this subjectivity gives a new understanding to the gender matrix. Issues ranging from child marriage, treatment of female child as a burden, purdah system, ill treatment of widow – almost all of the patriarchal notions and restrictions are present in between the gold, glory and valor of the haveli. The undercurrent of feminine and feminist sensibilities can also be viewed throughout the novel. More or less most of the aspects regarding the life and problems of women have been given thorough study in *Inside the Haveli*.

#### Discussion

The novel presents Geeta, an educated girl from Bombay who moves to Udaipur after her marriage with a University Professor. It takes her about fifteen years to adjust in accordance with the rules of haveli. Mehta comments, 'Two years ago when she (Geeta) left her parents' home in Bombay, she did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women' (15). The novel takes a sociological approach and represents the two cities Udaipur and Bombay as a representative of tradition and modernity respectively. As Mehta writes, "In Bombay Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli" (29).

The haveli represents the coexistence of two different worlds at the same place. This binary has social, psychological impact on the inmates. V. Geeta in her book 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 essential '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 a queen of the household, as its guardian angel, its custodian and so on; where as 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.(144-145)

As mentioned by V. Geeta in the novel also this inside/outside dyad exists. When Geeta gets down at the Udaipur station with her husband, the women ask her, "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?" (14). Women are always treated as inferior to the men. They have only a second place in the haveli. But the women do not protest against this instead they follow each rule precisely and expect every women to follow it without any doubt. Even a birth of girl child in the haveli is taken as a burden. In the novel *Kyali*, the cook says, "Girls are a burden, I admit, but what can one do once they are born?" (5).

What is very striking in this dyad is that it exists more in the upper class women. Indira Parikh and Pulin Garg in an article *Women's Space "Inside the Haveli" : Incarceration or Insurrection?* describes:

They come as brides and leave only for the funeral pyre. The husband's home is their prison, their castle, and their palace. They believe, or are made to believe, or have no other choice but believe, that this is all for their good... however, within the walls of their home, within the feudal system of a large joint family, run parallel themes of exploitation, intrigue and counter-intrigue, all revolving around the control of resources through legacy and heritage. This is the only life they know as wives.(90)

Geeta in the novel 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”(110). Further while going to Gopalji’s haveli Geeta feels:

Geeta’s eyes fell on the village women carrying their baskets of vegetables on their heads and their faces uncovered... As the car slowed down Geeta saw the eager faces of shoppers starting at the car slowed down Geeta saw the eager faces of shoppers starting at the car, and she envied, their freedom. They were free to choose saris from a hundred different shaded and designs, but she could select only from the bundle that the accountant brought to the house. Geeta watched some children pushing their way through vendor, and she yearned to join the happy boys and girls.(108-109)

The haveli represents the silence of women in the Rajasthan where this haveli is a symbol of oppression. Sangram Singh’s haveli has no structure from outside but it has a proper compartmentalization from inside. This inwardly well planned haveli is symbolic of the social boundaries of women who follow strict rudimentary believes in it.

Haveli has no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of the self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within the apartments. The courtyard connected their section[s] with that of the men (6)

The boundaries for the females not only restrict in the form of hidden courtyards of the haveli but also through the purdah/veil tradition that is an integral part of women’s identity in the havelis. Jasbir Jain her article Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah she writes, “The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination in built in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures the basis of gender

ideology(243)”. The veil is an oldest form of colonization, of domination and of control it is an invisible border that separates gender and creates deep social and sexual differences.

In the novel the veiling is not only physical but also emotional. The married women in the haveli were not allowed to enter in the man’s space. They were not even allowed to express their emotions openly. It is important to note that these restrictions were only for the rich and elite women while the maid servants had no such restrictions. Geeta finds that although the other women can thrive on gossip, they “never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feelings”(87). In extreme crises Geeta burns with rage and frustration yet remains silent.

Rama Mehta’s novel is written under the influence of feminism that made its mark in the academic circle in the late 1960s. though not an avowed feminist Rama Mehta is one of the contemporary women novelists who deals with their quest for identity. The novel symbolizes ‘Geeta as a New Woman’. By disintegrating the boundaries she managed to bring her real self. “It was not just that the classes filled the empty hours but they also offered a challenge”(161).She started teaching the children of the servants and maids. During this time she has to face criticism. As she developed an admiration for the haveli, she is filled with the outrage when she heard critical words about haveli and against her mother-in law. Gradually she no longer felt trapped in the haveli. She found that she had changed. Further she revolted against her mother-in-law when she showed her interest in Vijay’s marriage proposal. She bluntly opposed this idea as she did not want her daughter to get trapped in the orthodox boundaries of Rajasthan’s feudal system. She confessed it to herself, “What a mistake I made to stay on here, I could have easily persuaded Ajay to leave. This had to come sooner or later. Now I am really trapped and cannot escape. But on this point I will never give in whatever happens. If I have ruined my life, the children are not going to ruin theirs (206)

The novelist also brings the character of Lakshmi to bring out the idea of transgressing boundaries and spaces by bringing in the sub plot of

the novel. The gender matrix is so clearly drawn by the society that anyone transgressing this is not accepted by mainstream. Wandering women like Lakshmi are considered evil-a typical notion of patriarchy.

#### **Conclusion**

The novel is a metanarrative of gender discrimination in Indian society. So by contesting the old ideological beliefs of haveli with new progressive and pragmatic experience of education there is a rejuvenation of old glory of Haveli. It is important to note that the Haveli here is not only the site of confrontation but it is also very much a place where new gender rules are established by Geeta. From all this struggle she was able to obtain the right of education for the girl child irrespective of class distinction and right of a mother to have a say in the decision of daughter's marriage. What is important to understand in this is that these two victories never prompt her to underestimate the traditions of haveli. The demise of Bhagwat Singhji makes his son, Ajay the master of the haveli and Geeta, the new mistress. The novel ends with a promise that the new mistress will bring out a harmony between tradition and modernity. Geeta achieves self-discovery and asserts herself as an individual by putting an end to her doubts about herself. She holds herself in a household full of tradition bound, royal, noble mistress on the haveli. Unlike other feminists writers Mehta does not see all Indian customs in a dark light.

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