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Research Article

From the Margin to the Centre: A Study of Rama Mehta's Heroines

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ABSTRACT

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It was after independence that there was a sea change in the status of women as the writings by Indian writers showed that the women have started coming to the centre from the margins. Women started enjoying the dawn of freedom and the novel under study shows the struggle of Geeta to wrestle with patriarchal structure

Key words:

Matriarchal, Education, Women

After independence, Indian English novel shows a clear shift in English after a rapid change in the socio-cultural and political scenario. The interest of the writers now is shifted on the private sphere. People find themselves caught between the ethos of their old cultural values and the demands of a modern progressive way of life which is influenced by various western theories. Political freedom remained futile to fulfill the expectations of the people and could not solve many problems prevailing in society. Poverty, hunger, social injustice, gender discrimination still remain widespread. There was stress and strain on people's life and mind, and they feel suppressed and suffocated. The rapid development in science, industrialization and urbanization failed to provide any comfort to the people on surface level. There was feeling of discomfort, discontent, despair and alienation. Corruption and unemployment became the order of the day and the doors of justice were closed. The lines of W.B. Yeats about European culture are applicable here too: *Things fall Apart: The centre cannot hold*

Consequently, the writers begin to delineate the individual's quest for the self in all its varied forms, and to vividly present the problems and crises encountered by an individual in speedily changing Indian socio-cultural and socio-cultural milieu. Therefore, the thematic concerns of the novelists became totally different and they remained mainly concerned with the exploration and interpretation of the inner-self, the rootlessness, purposelessness and nothingness experienced by the characters. In this context, writers like Edward Albee, H. Pinter, Beckett, Tennessee William, Arther Miller, etc. portray estranged human relationships, suffocations of the mind, gender discrimination, abnormal behavioural patterns and bizarre happenings. The literary movement in the west inevitably influenced the Indian novelists who have artistically portrayed the inner flow of sentiments and thoughts of the protagonists in their novels. The protagonists seem to be suffering from a sense of acute alienation from the self, family and society.

Accordingly, the ripple of this changed sensibility and consciousness marked the perspectives, of the Indian writing in English, especially in the sixties. Therefore, the novelists start expressing the inexplicable perplexities, complexes, fears and anxieties experienced by people who are devoid of any inner poise of the spirit as well as any trust in themselves. Says Meenakshi Mukherjee:

The fiction of this period has turned introspective and the individual's quest for a personal meaning in life has become a theme of urgent interest for the Indo-Anglian writer.(204)

The modern leading Indian women novelists – Anita Desai, Nayantra Sahgal, Kamala Markandya, Arun Joshi, Shashi Deshpande and many others have tried their best to probe deeper into the recess of human nature and delineate it. These novelists portray and rather study the conflicts, stress and strain experienced by their protagonists. The protagonists of Anita Desai depict the inner disintegration who feel uncomfortable in the modern phony and materialistic social set up. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. One of the reasons that women have, in such large number, taken up their pen is because it has allowed them to create their own world. It has allowed them to set the conditions of existence, free from the direct interference of men. By and large, however, women do not enjoy an equal status with men. Even a well-educated and job-oriented woman can pursue a career only if she does not neglect her pre-ordained domestic duty. The woman may be one a biggest platform but they gave priority to discharge their feminine sensibilities. It is the main reason that

why many Indian women avoid marriage, for the fear that it would stand in way of their success in their respective fields. In the present day literary world, there are several great creative women writers in all Indian languages. Many of them have taken up issues related to the status of women in India. They strongly plead through their protagonists that the discrimination against them must stop.

The contemporary woman does not want to conform to the traditional image anymore. Age long suppression and torture in every form has forced her to lift the cudgels and stand up to fight the patriarchal society. Previously, women were deprived of the privilege to education whereas men were given all the facilities and prerogatives in this field. The only role of women was to accompany men in their beds, provide them with emotional and egoistic satiation so that they were re-affirmed of their supremacy from time to time. It was exactly after the feminists movements and in the later part of the 20th century that women writers like Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale, Bharti Mukharjee, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantar Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta and Manju Kapur have achieved recognition and they have shown their women protagonists protesting against patriarchy and finally emerging out as new women.

Feminist in the Indian context is a by-product of the Western liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. The Indian woman caught the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past but both to cast off her aspirations constitute the crux of aspirations and feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms, it precipitates in a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. In critical practice, it boils down to scrutinizing emphatically the plight of women characters at the receiving end of human interaction.

Feminist English literature is a wide spectrum of many colors and shades which are soft, prominent and strident. Consequently, the voices emanating there vary from the traditional – but – conscious – of – their – selves to exclusively self-seeking with a seeming vengeance. The efforts of the women have ranged from mild protest, seeking accommodation through moderation, love and persuasion to carving out of a self-sufficient exclusivist self.

They have entered those thresholds which were strictly banned for them and it was only men's privilege to enter those thresholds. They have thrown away the shackles of stereotyped Indian women and have taken up careers besides being traditional and self-effacing wives. They have yet not been able to free themselves from the grip of the spirit of Indian women who need men to stand beside them like a sheltering tree. She feels that man is the integral part of her being and feels incomplete without his company. Her thirst for family compels her to come to terms with man. But even then, the fact remains that it is lack of recognition of her entity by the male counterparts which has forced the women to raise their heads in rebellion against patriarchy and which has also triggered off a mammoth growth in feminist writers flaunting their pens as swords to slice at male ego and carve out a niche for woman in society where she is treated equal to men.

An effort has been made in this study to demonstrate that until the freedom movement and feminism, the women writers were inclined to accept the dominant image of female submissiveness and suffering, but these movements served as the rungs of the ladder of existence in this male-dominated society. The protagonists of the women writers can be observed entering the threshold of their existence, moving a step ahead and opening new vistas for themselves.

During the course of this study, the protagonists of Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur will also be discussed and an attempt will be made to reach on the conclusion that how these female protagonists wrestle with the circumstances and change their entity from caricatures to strong characters and emerge out as new women after resisting the patriarchal whims and fancies. For the course of this study, female protagonists from three different periods have been selected.

To begin with, Rama Mehta's "Inside the Haveli" has been deliberately picked up as it was written in late seventies, when the society was witnessing the dawn of awareness as the gates were opened by freedom struggle and the feminist movements. The novel is hailed as a modern classic, about an independent young woman's struggle to hold on to her identity in a traditional and patriarchal society.

Geeta, an educated vivacious Bombay girl, arrives into a conservative family and abruptly finds herself living in *Purdah* in her husband's ancestral haveli. Faced with this and other traditions that threaten to sniff out her independence and progressive views, Geeta fights to maintain the modern values that she has always lived by. Inside the Haveli is the story of how Geeta manages to carve out an identity for herself in the new and ostensibly stifling environment she has been plunged into. The novel realistically projects the status of women in past-feudal and regional India and also tireless efforts of Geeta to turn the tables without harming anybody. She is already enlightened and makes sincere and relentless efforts which finally work a change and she emerges out as a new woman in her own way and style.

Located in Udaipur, the former capital city of the Rajasthani princely state of Mewar, the novel powerfully explains the slow but inexorable decline of the life in *Purdah* to which high caste women, either Hindus or Muslims, were traditionally doomed in some parts of the country and particularly in Rajasthan. *Purdah* is basically the anglicized form of the Persian term *parda*, whose literal meaning is curtain, screen; by extension, veil for the face and also the system of segregating women.

Purdah, further, means privacy, not the mere freedom from intrusion by the public, as practiced individually in the Western world, but collectively a gendered line of divide in everyday life and custom. Nevertheless, this notation goes beyond the renunciation to a full life in the outside and mixed world of both male and female participation. It rather forecloses on the more specific and radical division of coterminous spaces and rooms within the blind walls of the Eastern household. The binary division of the type as versus them, that is implied in the lexeme privacy as understood by the East works, through difference, so as to switch from the straight Western act of resistance against the other to a more radical strategy of self-contained belonging and selected contiguity, such as we find in the closed network of kinship. The very idiomatic extensions of the term *Purdah* (or *parda*) constitute secrecy in the habitual definition given of the woman behind the veil. She is a *pardanashin*, that is, one who maintains the veil as an inviolable screen from the sight of men and strangers. As a matter of fact, the Hindi voice '*parda karna*' is habitually given as "to observe a veil, said a woman, to keep (oneself) under a veil", whereas *parda dalna* may be interpreted either as "to veil or to conceal or to ring down a curtain".

To observe (or to maintain) is the key word here, since it argues both for observance (that is, to obey rules or to keep custom) and also displays clear intimations of gendered identity, so as a view a priori women as powerless group. Apparently, the veil is constructed as if it were the discursive tool that attributes homogeneity to the otherwise concealed Eastern woman, who is made visible by her undifferentiated belonging to a “group identifiable purely on the basis of shared dependencies”.

As a result, this imposed linkage binds together the women who are in *Purdah* and at the same time prevents effectively their individual right to choose. Such a strategy of imposition declares communal unification through a previous process of dis-identification: to keep under a veil (*parde mein rahna*) produces an act of acknowledgement that defers the presence of the woman to a separate side inside the hierarchical space of the family organization. This process of emplacement within the possessive and coercive pale of the extended kinship group would cause a great deal of stress to a newly-wed spouse coming from a different regional (and often more westernized) background. The following lines from the novel from Geeta's arrival at Udaipur will certainly endorse the above said remarks:

Geeta's eyes had filled with tears as the train lost speed and was getting ready to halt at its last stop. Her light pink bridal sari was stained as she wiped the tears off her cheeks before Ajay could see them. Bombay seemed so far away; her mother was not within call; and she was alone in the compartment with man she hardly knew. But her tears had dried up and the thoughts of her mother had vanished 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, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, 'where do you come from that you show your face to the world'? Geeta, bewildered, frightened, managed to get into the car without talking to the women who followed her singing as loud as they could. It was when the car started she realized that her husband was not going to join her. She had lost him while the women had crowded around her. Two young girls of about sixteen who were his cousins-in-law along with four women had all squeezed into a four-seater Fiat Car. Geeta felt suffocated but dared not lower the glass. The maids had chattered away excited as the car gained speed. (16-17)

The passage categorically lays bare the inner texture of the dichotomy that describes difference beyond the over-simple divide of gender. This study particularly focuses on feminine individuality and resistance against a pre-oriented structure and not merely reeking of unsophisticated male oppression and domineering violence and speaking of a social system open to change and modification. Western criticism tends to forget, or to dismiss as devoid of importance, the crucial point that the Indian institution of *Purdah* reflects a wide range of interactions transcending the over-general issue of a patriarchal rule.

As a matter of fact, the definition of a life in *Purdah* should not be restricted to the awareness of the frozen and compulsory homogeneity it confers to women, seen as inferior and objectified human beings. In the western world, the term *Purdah* does suggest a system of representation that isolates a woman from the field of external social relations. As the inmate of a site that the orientalist discourse and the western male gazer equate rather arbitrarily with the harem, she appears as the mere function of what she is from a biological point of view. No more a fully socialized human being, the forbidden woman behind the veil stands in western imagination with the identity of a purely natural construct the passive result of a process that establishes both the quality and the mode of her inclusion within a male frame of power. Being deprived of their own places in the circuits of social life and free interpersonal relationships, these women are catalogued in advance as if they fight subordinate group with a common identity, regardless of individualities, previous locations, contradictory wishes and strategies of survival.

Inside the Haveli has various layers of themes and each of them can be converted into an independent study. The maiden reading of the novel will show it as a sociological study of the gradually changing status of the 'New Women' in India on account of her educational development and economic independence. The novel can also be read under the banner of feminist writings with a young and well-educated girl as the protagonist. Most importantly, the novel is deep study of a female protagonist who emerges out as new woman in her own style without breaking the patriarchal barriers but she manages to come out of the barriers and this barrier becomes her safety wall. It also very powerfully mirrors the intellectuality of the feminine world. The novel also focuses on one more forte of woman's personality as a normal, healthy human being with intense spiritual depth and a moral, an intellectual vision which enables her to emerge as a true image of eternal India. The novel also presents a sublime image of a woman who weaves the web of her existence with the filaments of determination and patience. The apogee of Geeta's story is her success in setting up a school for the women and children of the Haveli.

Rama Mehta, a true sociologist, had researched very deeply into the lives of western educated Hindu women and the Hindu divorced women, which were the main points of discussion in her fiction. Obviously, *Inside the Haveli* is written by her in the capacity of an informed critic of Indian society. In her earlier sociological study, 'The Western Educated Hindu Women' (1970), Mehta observes:

It was clear from the responses (of the women interviewed) that western attitudes and values in the domestic realm are not respected, nor is the western concept of individualism felt to be worth emulating. Educated Indians seem to be prepared to merge traditional attitudes with modern needs, but they want to separate the modern from the western. This may only be a confusion of terminology and perhaps there is no academic basis for making this distinction. Nonetheless the difference exists in the minds of the Indians and is, therefore, important. It shows that developing countries in the process of modernization want to maintain their way of life and want change but on the foundations of their cultural values.

In her novel, Rama Mehta describes the tireless efforts of Geeta who maintains the cultural and traditional values and reaps the harvest of success by bringing about a change in the characters of the inmates of the Haveli. Very judiciously, Rama Mehta in the novel becomes a teacher in the sense in which Chinua Achebe is a teacher in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe in his article, "The Novelist as Teacher" had stated:

Here then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration. And it is essentially the question of education in the best sense of the word.

The chief objective of Rama Mehta in writing this novel seems to blow the trumpet of Indian traditions and expects that the western educated Indian must regain his belief in these traditions. Moreover, she has not sermonized. Mehta, very realistically

poses a real life crisis for Geeta, a very well educated girl from Bombay, who after her marriage, comes to live in a haveli in Udaipur, and who is expected to face an ordeal of traditions. The element of new woman in Geeta is her resolution to appreciate the dignity, solemnity and validity of traditions and her education and western perception nowhere come in her way as a threat to her resolution. Geeta never becomes a puppet in the hands of old traditions of the Haveli, as she feels that these traditions are often preserved with the use of force and the lack of education which stunt the growth of an individual. Geeta is not the type of heroine who sticks to her identity and wins her freedom by rebelling against the age old traditions of the Haveli but she executes her plans of identity very judiciously and her education plays a pivotal role in carrying out her mission. Geeta gives a message through her efforts that in order to be modern, it is not necessary to sacrifice the cultural roots, rather these roots can be used to lay the strong foundation of modernity. Exactly, a new woman in her own way.

Interestingly, the novel opens with a long description of Udaipur and not with the protagonist and hence Udaipur becomes a symbol of contemporary India. Even after the independence of twenty five years, Udaipur, a renowned city of Rajasthan is presented as having elements of both the old and the new:

Udaipur was once the capital of State of Mewar; now it is only a town like many other towns in Rajasthan. But the change in its status hasn't diminished its status hasn't diminished its beauty, nor the air of mystery that hangs over what is now known as the 'old city'. It is surrounded by a bastioned wall, which after four hundred years is crumbling; in fact there are now big gaps, but the wall still divides Udaipur into two halves. The new township is beyond the old wall and the city within it. (p. 3)

The torch bearers of the culture of Haveli are Sangram Singh ji and Bhagwat Singh ji, who represent old Indians and the new Indian person, Geeta, who comes to live there after her marriage with Ajay – the son of Bhagwat Singh ji – a Professor of Science. The culture of Haveli is three hundred years old and it is likened to 'a banyan tree' (p. 6). The simile of banyan tree connotes strength, roots, antiquity and security. It is further described as being capable of withstanding the vicissitudes of weather and climate:

Today, the haveli has many courtyards with many rooms. Its roots have sunk deep into the soil and nothing shakes the foundations although the hot winds of summer dismantle the wooden shelters of the poor and the monsoon rains melt the mud walls of the poorer in the same gully. (p. 6)

Haveli has constantly flourished, grown and its traditions keep on spreading like banyan tree. In other words, the haveli represents rigid tradition which have matured and developed over a very long period of time. The outer part of the haveli shows a lack of design, but the interior part speaks volumes of its architectural and traditional beauty. In other words, the haveli has an independent culture of its own. It has its own world and its own constitution:

The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept Purdah. Their activities were conducted within their apartments. The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. Even so no man entered the courtyard without being properly announced. (p. 6)

The haveli has a battalion of servants with a different code of conduct than their masters. The male servants have the liberty to mingle freely with their women who do not cover their faces. The strict code of wearing *Purdah* has to be observed only by the women from the nobility. Moreover, the concept of *Purdah* remains central to the story. Geeta has to prove herself in such a tradition bound family. One can easily imagine the impact of these rigid traditions upon Geeta, who is well educated and aware of the modern ways of the world and internally takes this *Purdah* system as social backwardness. The only and pampered child of well-educated parents and a product of a co-educational college at Bombay, Geeta who is a dynamic, spontaneous, vivacious girl, used to be free and mixing with college and other boys, is hardly prepared by her background for the *Purdah* culture, which she has to observe for the rest of her life, after her marriage with Ajay:

She was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. One of them came forward, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world". (p. 14)

Geeta's hair stand on end and she feels absolutely bewildered. She is taken as an alien who was ignorant about the customs of Udaipur. Geeta is like a fish without water. She faces a chain of amusing and embarrassing situations in the haveli which are beyond her understanding. For instance, Pari, the eldest servant woman shows her from the car a building belonging to her elder uncle-in-law and Geeta spontaneously lifts her face pulling her sari back to see the building. She was at once admonished by Pari for breaking the Haveli's code: *No, No, you cannot do that In Udaipur we keep Purdah strange eyes must not see your beautiful face" (p.15)*. In this way Geeta's ordeal begins from the moment she steps down the train.

The *Purdah* system is traditionally considered the feminine code of conduct and modesty among high caste women in some parts of India as observed by Mehta in her book, *The Western Educated Hindu Woman*. Mehta further observes that practices such as early marriage dowry system, *Purdah* and joint family were quite effective in keeping women away from going to schools and colleges. The orthodox Indian families believed that educated women would threaten the harmony of family life by developing personal ambitions and goals (p. 19).

The tradition bound couple select an educated girl to be their daughter-in-law with hope that "even an educated girl can be moulded" to carry on the traditions of the haveli (p. 26) and their hopes were never deluded. Even her mother-in-law praises her for her good conduct and civilized manners. But inwardly, Geeta longs for freedom and after three years of her marriage, she asks her husband that when he would leave Udaipur. The reply of tradition bound and devoted son aggravates the miseries of Geeta: *I do not want to leave him alone; he is getting old (p. 45)*.

The answer of Ajay does not shock her because being an educated new woman, she understands that in the Indian tradition, the discharging of one's obligations towards parents is approved social behavior. Moreover, she has also been taught by her mother: *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 (p. 16)*.

Geeta is such a brilliant character that under any circumstances, she will not spoil the peace of the family. She is really a new woman and a lover of peace. She develops very good relations with all and sundry in her in-laws and particularly her mother-in-law is very fond of her. In this connection, Mehta seems to be giving the message of unity in diversity and presents an India where people of different backgrounds and attitudes live together. Geeta and her parents-in-law have perfect understanding for which the credit goes to the intelligence of Geeta. Instead of verbal skirmishes, they try to come to amicable solutions. There is perfect understanding, appreciation and tolerance for the views and needs of each other.

By and by Geeta adjusts herself in the tradition bound family. Eight years after her marriage, she becomes a mother of two children and gets completely adjusted in the haveli. Despite the *Purdah*, her movements are no longer clumsy and she is completely a changed new Geeta:

She had lost much of her girlish impetuosity; her temper was more subdued 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 (p.70).

Although Geeta compromises or adjusts according to the circumstances yet keeps an struggling with her suffocated existence: *But there were many times when she felt the crushing weight of the walls that shut off the outside world (p. 70).*

The gossip and chatter of the maids gave her only a temporary relief. The women of her age in the other havelis kept an adding fuel to the fire. They reminded her of “*little canaries in a cage who sang and twittered*”. They neither had the courage to break the rules of tradition not the “faith or commitment” to uphold tradition in the true sense. They fail to be Geeta’s models.

On the other hand, she has strong admiration for the men of haveli for keeping up Indian tradition. It is evident from Geeta’s attempts when she stealthily creeps into the mysterious and forbidden men’s apartments. Soon after her marriage, when finding herself absolutely alone in the haveli, she deliberately trespasses into the men’s section to have an idea about their way of life. While standing there in the corner of the room, her eyes catches huge gilt-framed portrait of the ancestors of her husband in their court dresses: she is gaped by their towering presence:

The finely chiseled faces framed in neatly groomed beards seemed to be looking down as guardians of the haveli and observing how succeeding generations were living up to the traditions bequeathed to them Looking at the strong determined faces, Geeta had thought with pride these must have been the kind of men who had fought and won battles against Moghuls (p. 17).

The second scene occurs after two years of her marriage during the birthday celebrations of her daughter, her personal maid Dhapu comes running to her and urges her to come and see what menfolk are doing. She goes up the back stairs alongwith her maid and observes the menfolk:

Geeta stared at the scene below as if hypnotized even though Udaipur was no longer a feudal state the traditions of Mewar seemed safe in the hands of these stem looking men [Sangram Singh ji, Bhagwat Singh ji, Ajay] all of whom seemed so composed, so determined and so refined. A glow of pride and affection filled Geeta. These were good people, gentle, kind and chivalrous. Looking at the men below she forgot her daily irritations; she felt proud to be the young mistress of the haveli (pp. 34-35).

Geeta does not idolize the menfolk like an illiterate and orthodox Hindu woman. But on the contrary she wants to see the best in the traditional Indian character symbolizing strength, chivalry, gentleness and compassion. She also covets that these qualities should be even in the women of India with a little bit of freedom. She starts aspiring for the freedom which she sees in the men of haveli. She feels that without social and intellectual freedom, women turn to scheming narrow-minded and resort to unscrupulous ways to get their way.

Geeta brings light to the haveli which ultimately promises to send away the darkness. She feels that only education for women could ensure social and intellectual freedom to them. Education of their daughter, Vijay, was not a question as both the parents are highly educated. But, inside the haveli, the education for girls and women is never considered an integral part of their development. That is why, Geeta has to struggle very hard for the schooling of Sita, the servant girl. There is a strong opposition from the males as well as from the females of the haveli and Geeta faces depression, self-doubt and serious internal conflict. Resultantly, Geeta wins the first battle when her father-in-law gives the consent of Sita’s schooling. The haveli metaphor is pertinent here:

The rooms in the haveli were difficult to keep warm. They were either too big and airy or too small, damp and dingy. Geeta had opened the tiny window in her room to let in the fresh air and the rays of the morning sun (p. 85).

The opening of the tiny window symbolizes the change, which would be brought about by Geeta is her new role i.e., the role of a new woman. Geeta plays her role brilliantly and does not openly revolt against the traditional and patriarchal whims and fancies of the haveli. Her education makes her a new woman in the real sense. She is an optimist who wants to prove the dictum that an optimist finds opportunity in every difficulty and a pessimist finds difficulty in every opportunity. She came to a family of strangers after getting married and found herself in a prison of traditional values of the haveli. She could afford to revolt as she was well-informed and educated. Even her parents were sufficiently educated and would never have given a deaf ear to the problems of their daughter. While carrying out her mission, she takes the elders of the haveli into her confidence and plays role of a new woman very meticulously.

She never wants to erase the glory of haveli, rather wants to make some additions to keep up the traditions of haveli. In her role of a new woman, she plans to start classes in the haveli for illiterate children and the daughter of the servants employed in the neighbourhood with the hope that their curtain of ignorance will be raised and their eyes to the realities of the world will be opened. In this selfless mission, she has to face the opposition of the elderly servant women and the mistresses of the other havelis accuse Geeta of giving fancy ideas to the poor and the uneducated. They apprehend that the parents would not be able to find grooms for their educated daughters and moreover their education will become a stumbling block in the way of their work and support in the haveli. It was a bolt from the blue for Geeta when ever her mother-in-law opposes the idea of such classes as she becomes the object of criticism, raised by other women of the haveli and from immediate neighbourhood, and Geeta almost decides to discontinue the classes. But both her parents-in-law applaud her idea for such classes and commend her efforts. Geeta becomes instrumental in bringing about a change in the thinking and consciousness of the haveli inmates. Finally, her efforts are greatly

commended and applauded even by former critics who feel that Geeta is empowering the weaker section of the society by making them self-reliant through education.

Geeta must be taken as a role model in her capacity of a new woman. Her mission of education was a grand success which results in bringing about a visible transformation in the members of the haveli. But during this process, Geeta herself also undergoes a metamorphosis. Being educated and responsible, she begins to realize the real meaning behind all the traditions of haveli and values them for their importance and relevance. She strongly realizes that any tradition is a whole system which cannot be judged by norms borrowed from a different system. Individual aspirations and freedom is important but the duty of children for their parents is more important. Now, she appreciates the wisdom and rationality of her husband in staying back on in Udaipur. When her father-in-law dies, he does not die alone and abandoned in the haveli, but surrounded by all the members of the haveli as well as the servants of the haveli. She starts appreciating the blessings and virtues of living together in a joint family where there is a tinge of caring and sharing. She does resist patriarchy, but in a judicious way she comes to realize that the head of the family is more than “a towering tree” that shelters and protects the entire family. In a very scholarly fashion, she observes that individualism in the Indian context is not self-indulgence and the possibility of freedom for the individual exists even within the laws of the tradition. A suitable modification of tradition may serve the purpose whereas a complete break from the tradition may put any individual in a burning cauldron. Geeta feels that there are amicable solutions also and war is not only key to settle the disputes.

Geeta faces trial after trial and she comes out victorious everytime. Geeta faces another difficult situation when there is a proposal for her thirteen year old daughter, Vijay, from one of the richest haveli families of Udaipur. It is the proposal of Daulat Singh ji for his son Vir Singh, an Arts graduate, a bright, dignified and dynamic young man, very handsome and respectful to elders, and planning to go abroad to complete his education. The request is basically for an early engagement so that Vir Singh can be hooked or fixed up before his departure to England for higher studies. Although the proposal is very attractive to Geeta's parents-in-law, but she has certain reservations in her response to the proposed alliance. Her first reaction: *I won't ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still child* (pp. 164-165).

Geeta finds herself in utter confusion and at cross-roads to take this decision because she can't bear to see her daughter languishing in haveli, but the other part of her mind urges her to accept the offer after keeping in mind the worth of boy as well as reputation of the family. There is a considerable conflict in Geeta's mind about the proposal of this marriage. It was after a lot of discussion on this issue that Geeta is finally left free to take her own decision. In the beginning, Geeta was absolutely sure of turning down the proposal but her visit to Daulat Singhji's haveli wavers her and forces her to re-think about the proposal. Even her mother-in-law stops poking her nose into this affair as she believes that Geeta is rational and practical enough to reach on safe conclusions. The merits of the proposal force her to accept it and the fear of reverting to an orthodox way of life incline her to reject it. Geeta finds herself in an awful dilemma which is very real. She is an independent new woman and never wanted to leave the things to the elders in the family: *“My daughter's marriage is my concern”* (p.171).

Her condition resembles a hungry man who has in front of him a plate of food which is poisoned. If he takes it, the poison will kill him, if not, then he will die of hunger. She can neither reject the offer nor accept the offer. Ultimately she keeps the decision pending by burying herself in a book (p. 176).

There were mainly two factors which contributed to the acceptance of the proposal. The first is her own understanding of the Indian tradition, where mothers of growing daughters start looking for a match quite early as Geeta's own mother had done (p. 175). The other is her bed-ridden father-in-laws talk with her, just at the time of his death. Before his death, he had explained very categorically to Geeta that he had given a long thought to the proposal, had discussed it at length with his wife and that an Indian woman's destiny is marriage and which is ultimate. He had also made her clear that though nobody can ensure a girl's future happiness, the best that parents can do is to find a good match in a good family for their daughter. He further stresses the necessity of the completion of Vijay's education before her marriage (p. 198). He had thrown the ball in the court of Geeta and now she had to take the final call on the issue. Geeta does not compromise even on emotional grounds when Manji Bua Sa, her cousin-in-law, urges her to give her consent so that Bhagwant Singhji can die in peace (p. 203). However, there was a cumulative effect of her father-in-laws talk on her and she decides to reconsider her earlier resolution. She procrastinates in taking the decision because the proposal was not entirely unsuitable to her daughter and her final decision remains close to the traditional option. She carefully examines all aspects of the issue and fits fully in the role of a new woman.

Finally, Geeta achieves the right synthesis between the western and the traditional ways. She never wanted that her daughter should get married very young and particularly without the completion of her education. At the same time, she also realizes and feels the pressure of Indian reality on a girl. She does not accept the proposal until all her conditions are first met with. The new Geeta dictates and presides throughout the story.

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