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Research Article

Geeta and Laxmi: Wrestling together Inside the Haveli

Dr. Naresh Sharma

Associate Professor (English), GC Nagrota Bagwan, Himachal Pradesh, India.

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Corresponding Author:

Dr Naresh Sharma

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ABSTRACT

There was an unprecedented change in the condition of women in society and this article tries to dissect the cult of new women in the characters of Geeta and Laxmi who fight the battle of their existence in a very stylish way.

This article will try to dissect the cult of new women in the garb of Lakshmi, the maid servant of haveli is diametrically opposite to Geeta. Lakshmi was a woman who always had an individualistic streak in her. Once, she was suspected of having an affair with Hiralal, the driver, who had been giving presents to her, though there was nothing wrong between them, runs away from the haveli to avoid the anger of her husband. She goes away after showing her back to her infant daughter, Sita:

In case of a conflict between [the outward façade and the inner spirit of any socio-moral structure], a person has to make a choice. Lakshmi (Inside the Haveli) a servant woman, when suspected by her husband about her chastity, leaves the haveli but upholds the basic value of her honour and purity of character.

But the novel shows that in taking this step, Laxmi partially succeeds and awfully punished. She is deprived of her daughter and continuously misses her. She has to pay a heavy price and the tables of her life are turned. She has to come to school stealthily to have a glance of her daughter and her condition is like a gardener who cries for a flower. It is true that her husband is bad tempered but not totally bad. She runs from pillar to post to realize her existence and ends up as mistress to a series of other men – the *paanwala*, the tailor and the like. There is no doubt an option to break away from the husband but it is not a universal phenomenon rather it depends on the norms of society where the question of such breaking takes place. Laxmi should have learnt the art of adjustment from Geeta, who quite early in the book seriously considers leaving her husband if he does not want to move out of the haveli:

“I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur, you are all pampered. You lead your lives and think women are mere chattels”, replied Geeta with anger. “In fact, I don’t even see any point in being here. I may as well go and stay with my parents. You won’t miss me; there are hundreds of people to take care of you” (p. 53).

These words of Geeta never irritate Ajay and he very plainly confesses:

‘You are right, we men are spoilt, but surely you know how important you are to me. I never thought that you would also make my parents happy. Do you know, Geeta, I could never have been content in Udaipur had you not adjusted to the ways of the haveli. I would then have really run away from here’. He said, “I am really proud of you, but that’s little consolation to you” (p. 54).

The novel may be taken as a culmination to perfect and blissful married life. Geeta really epitomizes the ideal of Indian womanhood because of her self-effacing character and hence she is a new woman in each capacity. When Ajay expresses his need of her and also the need of his parents, she at once succumbs to the pressure of emotions and is ready to adjust to the life in Udaipur. With the passage of time, frustration and alienation is replaced by pride and affection for the haveli. Finally, she reaches at a stage to tell herself very honestly that haveli is a synonym of love and care and she likes to see her children growing up in such type of affectionate environment:

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 (p. 137).

Geeta adores and appreciates the positive aspects of the haveli traditions and particularly likes the poise, manners, discipline, respectfulness towards all elders and a feeling of gregariousness among all the inmates of the haveli, irrespective of owners and servants. Her misconceptions about the education of women and children also fritter away:

Geeta suddenly loved the large empty rooms of the haveli; they no longer looked unfriendly and haunted. The Cobwebs that had become a part of their décor were now swept clean by the boys [who came to learn from Geeta (p. 130).

The cap of harmony should be decorated and placed on the head of Geeta. She introduces certain necessary modifications in the haveli but not without the opinion of other members of the haveli. Some members of the haveli resisted her new ideas in the beginning, but with the passage of time everybody comes near or round to her views (p. 150). Her character resembles a river and not a pond. Directly or indirectly, the author upholds the preservation of a living, ever-growing tradition through Geeta, who never advocates an uncritical conservation of these old and vital traditions.

Geeta proves herself a new woman in all areas and relationships. She plays the role of a Pole Star and everybody flocks to her for the solution to their individual problems. Take out Geeta from the haveli and it will give a deserted outlook. She gives a due and proper regard to all relations and speaks in a manner suitable with different family members depending on her relationship with them. For instance, when she is in rage, she uses very plain and fiery language with her husband:

Geeta sat up, her hair disheveled and her eyes red, her voice trembling with anger. She said, "I have put up with enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend any more Well, Ajay, let me tell you that I don't care what family Vir Singh comes from or how much money he has buried in the ground. I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college" (pp. 164-165).

Such type of language is frequently used by the modern Indian women with their husbands without being misunderstood because both are equally qualified and can understand each other without being misunderstood. On the other hand, in the traditional relationship, the wife must speak with deference, low voice, respect and humility. Further, Geeta uses a very polite and formal language with her in-laws:

"Bhabi, it's all my fault, please forgive me. I should never have permitted the girls to join the classes; from tomorrow I will tell them not to come", said Geeta with sincerity (p. 139).

Geeta has an extremely fine sense of timing. She is a wonderful manager and powerful character who remains omnipresent in the novel.

The multifaceted personality of Geeta is the living testimony of her image of a new woman and it also puts a stamp on her education which enables her to deal with all kinds of situations with perfect skill.

It is true that Geeta has to do certain sacrifices and adjustments but these adjustments are not by a complete surrender to the ways of the haveli. She has her own victories no less important than adjustments and sacrifices. On certain occasions, she takes the haveli along with her in violation of its long-established traditions. It is particularly seen in the education of the girls in the haveli.

Geeta takes the step of sending Sita to school, who had run away from the haveli. It is a revolutionary idea which met opposition from all the corners of haveli, but Geeta does not budge a little but stands firm. However, when Sita starts going to school, even critics start acknowledging her efforts. Kanwar Sa herself is for all praise for her daughter-in-law:

I should be grateful. An educated girl like her could so easily have been a total misfit here. What could we have done, Pari, if she were insolent, or worse, indifferent. No, she has never raised her voice to me, and in her own way she is proud of the haveli (p. 118).

Geeta proves the illusion of the inmates of the haveli that education does not necessarily spoil a girl and finally the old lady gives her consent to send Sita to school.

Geeta leaves an indelible impression upon the thinking of the 'havelians'. The validity and authenticity of sending Sita to school is proved later when the fiancé of Sita insists on having an educated girl as his bride. So, Kanwar Sa feels obliged and grateful to Geeta for having sent the girl to school (p. 149).

The journey of Geeta continues and she has her further plans to undertake the project of sending or teaching other small children and grown up women to her room for education. Kanwar Sa again raises her eye brows with the apprehension that it will bring a bad name to the haveli. But even then she tolerates the classes for the satisfaction of Geeta. At the same time she hopes that the experiment would be short lived. Soon women from other havelis raise questions over Geeta's violation of the rules of haveli. Although Kanwar Sa agrees with them but would never make her daughter-in-law feel small in front of them. So the classes continue and rather grow in popularity. Besides the classes, the opposition too continues. Some relatives of Kanwar Sa complain to her that their maids are ignoring their family duties for the classes and moreover Jiwan Niwas is being badly criticized for such practices. On the contrary Kanwar Sa also takes it as a challenge and Geeta feels overwhelmed with the kind of support extended to her by her mother-in-law.

Geeta is also filled with remorse for disturbing her mother-in-law and causing pain to her for she knows the reputation of Jeewan Niwas is dearer to the old lady. Geeta feels so guilty that she puts the entire blame on herself and starts planning to change the programme of classes to maintain the decorum of haveli. But her mother-in-law objected to the proposal and declared that the classes will continue as before. At this gesture of generosity, Geeta burst into tears and putting her head in her mother-in-law's lap sobs like a child (p. 140).

This incident shows that there is perfect and peaceful understanding in the relationship between Geeta and her mother-in-law and moreover there is no conflict and confrontation between them. With her intelligence, Geeta carves a permanent niche in the hearts of everybody. Geeta resists without opposition but her way of resistance is refined, cultured and rational. Her mother-in-law felt overjoyed when a visitor says, "*Hukum, you have been blessed with many things, but your daughter-in-law is the haveli's greatest ornament*" (p. 161).

There is violent opposition in all these instances, but the opposition is slowly changed to acceptance because of the capability of Geeta. The large heartedness and the loving nature of Kanwar so plays a very tactful role and Geeta's own behavior is responsible for making the inmates of the haveli kind-hearted thoughtful and loving.

The behavior of Geeta even changes the men of the haveli who also remain loving, tolerant and generous. Her husband always listens to her and never becomes a barrier in the execution of her plans and mission. When Geeta enters the haveli, her father in law shows the utmost consideration to the new corner of the haveli. When his wife is away from the haveli he tells Pari, the eldest of the servant maids:

Pari, I hope binniji (Geeta) does not feel lonely. This is a big house and it can be depressing at time; especially for someone like her..... I hope you are taking good care of her (p. 83).

It takes two to make a quarrel. Though Geeta was educated but her education did not muddle her brain. She uses it as a tool to cement relationships in the haveli. Love is two way traffic. The harmonious relationship that Geeta builds up inside the haveli, without either surrendering her own intellectual independence or disrupting tradition, reflects her ability to use her education in a positive and creative manner which really makes her a new woman. One of the most difficult decisions that educated women have to take is to withdraw from active public and economic activity after marriage, for the responsibility of running a family and looking after the children, thus dishonoring the large scale programmes for women's education. In the capacity of a new woman, Geeta makes one of the most valuable contributions that educated housewives can make and which perhaps no other agency can perform to ignite the light of learning, love of mental independence and a habit of deciding for oneself into the dark rooms behind high walls. Education supplies her the plumes of a new woman. It has helped her in developing that what Narold Taylor in his essay, "Education for Women" considers to be the chief purpose of women's education:

"a sensitive and flexible mind and a way of facing reality, whether it is the reality of home and her children or the reality of a profession, with a trust in herself and a respect for the necessities".

Through the story, Rama Mehta has pointed out that women writers have moved away from the traditional enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters who are searching for their identity. They find a balance between tradition and modernity in their own way and in this pursuit, they win the title of a new woman: *Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the women in Indo-Anglican novel is passing.*

The protagonist, Geeta struggles hard to carve out an identity for herself in the new and traditional environment she has been plunged into. With utmost simplicity and tenderness Mehta represents how Geeta learns to blend in both her education and her modern values and the old customs of the haveli. Geeta has to live in a constricted atmosphere of world of women, where men are regarded as virtual Gods. Nothing is done without consulting men and the whole routine of the haveli revolves around them.

Geeta tends herself, all alone with her education and ideas in the haveli. But this loneliness is brief as she is always surrounded by the women of the haveli. Geeta has no suitable companion with common interests, to spend time constructively or to engage herself meaningfully. She decides to make out a way to relieve herself from this suffocating situation. She is not taught to conceal her feelings. But in the haveli no one really expresses one's feelings. They cover their emotions in an elaborate exchange of gestures. Geeta finds this very strange. Geeta with her modern thinking finds it very perplexing one agrees with G.D. Barche when he says:

The crux of the problem is that man-woman relationship has, on the whole, evolved through centuries on a set-pattern i.e. man to rule and woman to obey: man, the master, and woman the slave; man the god, and woman, the devout This centuries old mutely followed relationship is now challenged.

It takes almost fifteen years for Geeta to adjust herself to the life of haveli. In her silent revolution without offending anyone she induces in her mother-in-law a feeling of warmth towards modernity. In this context, she brilliantly plays the role of a new woman and her education supplies her courage and strength. She deviates from "dissatisfaction to acceptance, from tolerance to generosity, and finally to magnanimity".

Through patience, education and perseverance she is able to get the desired changes in the haveli and she also gets transformed in the process. Finally, the prison is converted into home and she decides to bring change in the lives of women of the haveli through education and awakening. It is quite interesting that the changes in human environment are brought about by a woman:

Geeta is not a rebel nor is she a radical feminist – but in her own quiet way she brings about changes in the lives of young girls in the family and outside.

Geeta starts teaching women from all classes of the society without any discrimination. She teaches servants, their children and the daughters of the haveli. She also starts sewing and embroidery classes to make the women economically independent. Initially, there is a lot of resistance (the maid servants think that an educated girl, would be a total misfit in the community) but she is now determined not to be crushed under the heavy walls of the haveli. With the support of her in-laws and her husband, she is able to send Sita to school. In this connection Pari says:

'Whatever anyone may say, Binniji has changed the lives of these girls, Hukkm, most of them now can read and write; they can get work, they don't have to depend on the havelis' (p. 191).

Even, Geeta's great sister-in-law, Manji also supports her and says:

'Do not be afraid. It is time things changed. Once we, the old, are dead, the havelis will no longer survive. It is no good living on in the past; for the sake of our children, we must look to the future' (p. 115).

Geeta's husband also likes the idea and supports her in holding the classes for the women of the haveli and outside it. He says:

These old maids are little tyrants; don't be frightened by them. They don't realize that my mother's generation will die and with it the traditional way of life and Purdah too. It is time you taught them something new (p. 137).

The women of the haveli started becoming flexible in accepting the new ideas which exist outside the haveli. The new life is shown to them by Geeta which epitomizes not only the new ideas but also the regard for the customs of the haveli. With the passage of time, she feels a bond and an attachment with the haveli and also desires that the children must grow up in the haveli.

It was also victory for Geeta when she does not consent to the engagement of her daughter Vijay with a well-bred educated young man from another haveli. She does not accept the proposal in spite of the persuasion of her-in-laws though she does rethink about it towards the end of the novel. She also resents the marriage proposal for Sita but later agrees to it as she

knows that it is important to abide by family customs especially for the poor. Her mother-in-law gives credit to her for Sita's marriage:

'Binniji, you have made Sita's life. We have all been proved wrong. But now we must accept their condition. Marriage is the only security for women. It is you who have made it possible for her to be married into a family with land, with a well, a brick house and bullocks (p. 188).

Geeta plays the role of a new woman with great determination and humility. She tackles all the problems like the child-marriage, women education and their economic independence. Geeta is not shown as a wild and a robust rebel as it would have resulted in shattering the peace of the haveli. Mehta believes in time tested concept of marriage so she can't make her protagonist to take such a drastic step. Her protagonist shows intelligence, patience, love and concern for others who respond positively.

In the end, Geeta is a new woman, the new mistress of the haveli with transformed traditions. Her character appears convincing because she has a positive attitude towards life. She does not struggle for her own freedom but for the freedom of others and in the sense she is certainly a new woman in her own way. She knows her capabilities and also knows how to tackle with the situation in adverse conditions and finally succeeds in managing to get the desired changes in the haveli. Her love and concern for each other binds the haveli people together.

Geeta acts as an agent to bring a positive change in the old traditional culture of the haveli. But the old thinking is so deep rooted that the people resist to any kind of change. Tradition is like a fortress protecting them from the outside world, giving them security and a sense of superiority. Geeta feels like an outsider, an onlooker. She can never share their past. She doesn't like the rigidity with which the women clung on to old traditions. She can't become one with the haveli women. She maintains her identity and never compromised with the rigid customs though she respected the dignity of the haveli. She believes that it is the social existence that determines consciousness and not the consciousness of men which determines their existence.

The life of an individual undergoes various changes through various struggles against the slavery of mind and body. And this confrontation of the opposites compels human beings to renew themselves in order to evolve to the higher degree of consciousness. Geeta is also confronted with the two opposite ways of life and finally she finds herself a completely changed human being who loved and respected the haveli along with her own identity. Geeta struggles to attain authentic selfhood – the core of being from where the human action springs – which not only enables her to grasp the reality but also endows a meaning to her existence. Malashri Lal comments in the context of the relevance of Rama Mehta's sociological studies to the novel:

Western educated Indian women, like Rama Mehta, have been influenced by and attracted towards the concept of feminism originating in Europe and the USA. But they need to negotiate a fine line of appositional Indian values (Lal -89).

Geeta tries to create a feminine space by educating the servant's children and maid servants. She manages to carve out an identity for herself among the traditional women of the haveli who still make their presence felt only by upholding the ancestral customs. The strategy of Geeta is negotiation and not transmutation. Her tradition is transformed a bit from within as she takes over the role as *tradition's* voice, the mistress of the haveli at the novel's end. Geeta changes tradition and her vision of tradition as restrictive but not with its rule completely altered. She makes it a living and livable structure rather than experiencing the sense of being nothing or having lost everything. Unlike the modern protagonists, who in search of purpose and meaning in life often leads to loneliness and disintegration, Geeta manages to direct her energies in a positive manner, brings peace to herself and her family. Hence, Geeta is a vehicle of change. It was her intellectual endeavour which brought a great change inside the haveli without disturbing the old traditions.

The ultimate note of the novel is praiseworthy and cautionary. Rama Mehta endorses change so long as it is gradual and receives community consensus. Compromise rather than rebellion is the pattern to be adopted. Hence, Lakshmi's tragedy is repudiating the haveli; Geeta's success in adapting traditions to suit new ideas. Realistically, Mehta points out that upper class educated women must provide the leadership to those born in less privileged conditions and this is what Geeta does in her role of a new woman. The portrayal of Geeta as a new woman is idealistic and hopeful. The novel powerfully portrays her journey from modernity back into the traditional world behind the veil, where the severe restrictions of etiquette and subservience dominate life. Mehta looks beyond the shortcomings of persons and social customs that she observed as a sociologist, towards a vision of a creative and meaningful dialectics between the younger generations and the older traditions and way of life. She suggests ways in which the modern spirit and education can be brought to work upon the almost static older system, so as to revitalize tradition and to adapt it to the changed situations of the modern world. All these ideas are spread by the writer through her protagonist Geeta. She fights the battle of her life and wins it by using 'education' as her weapon. Her role in the novel is pivotal and all other characters revolve around her and emerges a new woman incontrovertibly.

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