

The Other Side of This/That:
A Study of Rama Mehta's
Inside the Haveli in the Postcolonial Context

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ABSTRACT

Balance and harmony are the essential elements of a peaceful and meaningful existence but sadly enough our modern life is about everything else but balance and harmony; the chaos and confusion which is in the air everywhere, be it the east or the west, about the future of our race is a testimony to it. Thanks to the philosophy of binary opposition one of the postcolonial myths we have chosen to believe in is that it can either be there way or ours i.e. it can either be the east or the west, it can either be the good or the bad or for that matter it can either be the light or the darkness. We have chosen to ignore the fact that as good and bad, light and darkness are complementary to each other so the east and the west might also be complementary to each other and that it is good in many ways that now we are moving towards a culture which is a homogeneous blend of the two. Rama Mehta like all the novelists of her age too was concerned with the question as to what is the fate of the postcolonial India. Her novels are her answers to the question. In her, we find the ideas of colonial education and influence and native tradition and learning, the ideas of tradition and modernity rather than waging a war to claim superiority over one another come out as complimentary to each other; enabling to establish a balance and harmony in life in the changing scenario. This paper is an attempt to find answers to the problem of our postcolonial predicament with reference to her novel Inside the Haveli.

Keywords: Colonial impact, modernity, postcolonial, English education, tradition, culture

Rama Mehta is one of those enlightened Indian Novelists who shedding all the previous notions of colonialism associated with the English Language, freeing it of the “colonial hangover” have adopted it as their mode of communication or expression not to confirm or negate the colonial or the post-colonial authority but to give voice to their own original unbiased and unaffected Indian sensibility in the modern context; R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Girish Karnad and Manoj Das being the other important voices in this regard. As in R. K. Narayan so in Rama Mehta the expression of the Indianness carries with it the innocence and freshness like that of a child which more than anything else arrests our attention through its simplicity, magic and charm. While in R. K. Narayan the encounter with the west in the form of English education is depicted with the natural confusion of the first witnesses of the change; in Rama Mehta the response is that of the settled mature sensibility an obvious result of the experience, empathy, awareness and understanding afforded through the journey of time. While in R. K. Narayan the ideas of Indian tradition and modernity i.e. access to English education and way of life invite curious but satirical response; in Rama Mehta they rather than waging a war to claim superiority over one another come out as complimentary to each other; enabling to establish a balance and harmony in the contemporary Indian life in the changing scenario. *Inside the Haveli* is her best-acclaimed novel which when published not only impressed the elite but all and also won the prestigious Sahitya academy award for its noble ideas, presentation, craft and concerns.

Placed within multiple frames of sociology, history and aesthetics Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* offers us an understanding of History, Culture, traditions, lifestyles and gender politics of Rajasthan in the changing scenario and the change here is the change for good which comes not suddenly but slowly and softly as a result of the dedicated efforts of not only the protagonist of the novel but also all the other characters of the novel. As the narrative opens through the bastioned walls,

four gateways, palaces and Haveli's we are transported into the life and world of people of the "old city" of Udaipur. The township outside the "old city" and the *havelis* and *gullies* inside present a contrast between the modern and the traditional ways of life. The new city is representative of the modern life with people who are under the colonial hangover cherishing their rose gardens and secluded alien ways of living:

In the new town, the rich and poor are separated by the rose gardens; they don't know each other; they live separate lives. The only thing common between them seems tarmac road, on which the poor too have the right to walk. (Mehta 1996: 5)

The old city is representative of the unadulterated traditional way of life with all its age-old values and customs, rituals and tradition and the social culture somehow magically preserved and therefore untouched and uninfluenced by everything that is colonial because of the conviction and committedness of the inhabitants inside. While in the new city the rich and the poor share nothing except the tarmac road on which both of them walk indifferently of each other's presence; in the old city the rich and the poor share the sorrows and pains, happiness and joys of one another standing together through them all by the way of their pre-defined roles and traditional code of conducts. The rich people in the old city are never short of helping hands and the poor people, unlike the new one, are never left helpless and alone in their struggles rather they too have the rich standing by their side helping them through their struggles and pains.

Time never remains the same and change is the law of nature and therefore after the loss of the glory of the days of Maharajas rule, which people of the old city cherish memories of, as the narrative opens we find them exposed to the foreign influence. In the *haveli* of Sangram Singhji in the old city, we find it in the form of our main protagonist, Geeta, the daughter-in-law of Sangram Singh. Geeta as we first find her to be is an English-educated girl from Bombay open to new ideas and modern way of life and completely unaware of the customs and traditions of the great Rajwadas and their culture. English education for Geeta

has not made her reactionary and revolting in nature but sensible, patient and mature and therefore as the narrative opens we find her to be struggling hard to adjust to the alien ways of life she has been put into trying hard to understand the *purdah* system, learn the rituals and codes of conducts with the help of her mother in law, Pari (the senior maid) and others.

As already discussed earlier in Rama Mehta tradition and modernity rather than waging war against one another come out to be complementary in nature and therefore in the novel we find Geeta to be relying on the maid Dhapu who not only trains her about how to carry on well with elders and seniors, men and women of the *haveli* and the outsiders but also about how to get approval for her distinct desires and ambition alien to the inhabitants of the *haveli*. Through Dhapu Geeta gets to know about how to live in conformity to the *pardah* but at the same time pursue her own little joys and desires intelligently by being calm and patient rather than inviting tension and resistance by being harsh, arrogant and revolting.

As the narrative proceeds the detailed accounts of the life and situations of the *haveli* with its separate sections for men and women, its strict *pardah* system, with the festivities and rituals, extravagant celebrations and mirth, detailed systems of mourning and so on shock and amuses us all at the same time. We start imagining about the two distinct worlds existing under the same roof, Geeta's world representing the modern values and the *haveli* people representing the traditional ones. Geeta's adventure of trespassing into the men's apartment to fulfill her curiosity about how 'the men lived in men's apartment and where her husband relaxed after coming back from the university during the daytime' when caught red handed by Pari, the senior maid makes us chuckle but at the same time feel sad about her innocent spirit and the contrasting system of life destiny has put her into.

Rama Mehta unlike many other contemporary Indian novelists like Shashi Deshpande and others, who draw upon their characters especially in relation to the old system of *pardah* completely on the angels and demons theme, understands the true face of humanity and therefore we find her characters in *Inside the Haveli* to be the natural harbingers of the human follies like