

Post-Independent India and Transition in Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*

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Abstract: *Inside the Haveli*, first published in 1977, is widely regarded as the unsurpassed novel in Indian English Literature with a reputation for capturing the essence of the time. The novel deals with the metamorphosis of the Indian social life prompted by Independence. It was the quintessential issue in the post-independent India which happens to be recreated at its best by Rama Mehta in *Inside the Haveli*. The novel is embedded with captivating artistic qualities like simplicity, gentleness and realistic depiction, which contribute to create an enriching and kaleidoscopic picture of the changing time. It reveals the flux of time influencing contemporary life and culture, including the place of women in Indian society. Moreover, the novel maintains a fascinating record of the subjugating situation of women on the brink of change. Through which, the novelist achieves an indictment of the patriarchal society of the time. To this end, she uses myriad undercurrents which allow her to catapult the dominant influences. In addition to this, the novel reveals its artistic prominence by establishing structural and thematic polarity and the binary opposition between the characters, which enable the novelist to achieve an implicit criticism of the established tradition.

Keywords: Indian English Novel, *Inside the Haveli*, Metamorphosis, Post-Independent India

Inside the Haveli exemplifies the theme of change during the crucial period of India's social history. The subject resonates throughout the work, and the elements like the narrative strategy, characters, picturesque description, exposition, and plot and chapter scheme prove to be supportive. The intricate arrangement is highly effective and captivating, which endeavours to develop a thematic play throughout the novel. The embellished structural qualifications of the novel exquisitely capture the imprints of change that occurred at various levels and degrees.

The novel comprises a graphic presentation which infuses the theme of transition. The opening paragraph, for instance, is topographic and offers us the description of the town Udaipur: the former princely capital of Mewar and the Haveli of Sangram Singhji where Geeta arrives as a new inhabitant. The description owes a striking resemblance to the opening of E. M. Foster's *A Passage to India*. Specifically, the intricate details revealing the fractures in the old and the new generation, the poor and the rich, and the old town and the new colony are particularly impressive. This fascinating delineation constructs a clear-cut picture of emerging India of the Post-Independence period, which saw the culmination of traditional beliefs and living patterns at the expense of the orthodox aspects of the town. The description maps the very metamorphosis effectively, revealing, at the same time, the author's exceptional touch of sensibility.

The novel involves an exquisite exposition which relates us to the glimpse of change and the ending to the passage of time engulfing, particularly, the Haveli people. In the opening passage itself, Rama Mehta expounds on the theme of change. She manoeuvres it by making key propositions. She writes: that after losing its regal charm, the town has become like 'many other towns'. The statement indicates the loss of distinctness of the town: that after preserving four hundred years of glorious tradition, the town has become ordinary like any other town. It alludes to the changes brought about in Indian society by independence and democracy. It indicates the liberating influence that has unshackled the masses from the confinement of class and tradition.

The narrative is revealing and highlights the transformation in the late nineteen seventies decade. It triangulates around Geeta, the Haveli and the town. It is highly implicative and structural and contributes to accentuating the idea of transition. For instance, the crumbling bastion wall, circumscribing the old town and dividing the old and the new, is symbolical and signifies the age-old customs and traditions deeply ingrained in the Indian soil. It implicates that the customs and traditions, though in a shaking condition, are unyielding and withhold disparity as they stretch up a demarcating line between the old and the new patterns of life. The description of the new city adjoining the wall signifies the emergence of new values and customs. The new town is pluralistic and lacks a powerful hierarchical lineage. Its pluralism symbolises the transformed India of the post- Independence era. On the other hand, the old city stands for the passing cultural hierarchy. The author intently compares the neatness and cleanliness of the township with the filth and shapelessness of the old. It also reveals the old and new patterns of life in the town.

The author's meticulous observation of the transition engulfing the town and the people displays sly humour. The comparison between the splendid Havelis with the humble huts is revealing. She reveals the changing predicament of the indignant lives by associating us with their past and present. She claims that formerly even the grunting of elephants pleased or entertained them but not now due to growing impatience fostered by increased consciousness and opportunities. The description unveils the changes brought in by independence. It conveys the loss of Rana's power some twenty-five years ago and the changes since then. She tickles at the residents of the old town for clinging to memories and reminiscing about the bygone glorious days. For whom the new town is a kind of appendage. Its neatness and cleanness are obnoxious for them as it lacks filthy gullies. The well neat gardens of this town are insufficient to display its soul as it has no ancestral roots. On the other hand, the people inhaling the fresh air of change are perplexed as to why the old town people do not move out of the congestion and bondages. She writes: "The people in the new town explore the old city, again and again. They cannot understand why the people don't move out of the congestion, the smells, the little gullies, and come and join them where the air is clean, where there is land to build on." [ITH, p. 5]

The novelist offers graphic and telling details of Sangram Singhji's Haveli. Although the description of the Haveli creates the picture of an unchanging and expanding foundation of orthodox culture, later it appears to yield, rather, slowly to the transformation in all aspects. The description reveals the time of construction some three hundred years ago and the initial structure of three rooms which later expanded beyond the limit like a Banyan tree. It now contains many compartments, separating the servants, women and masters. Although outwardly shapeless, it has a definite plan inside. The beehive shape reflects a fractional mentality with demarcating sections segregating women from men. The author, through this description, tries to signify the deeply rooted, unshakable foundation of the orthodox traditions. However, the humorous tone arouses the desire for unforeseen change. She writes, "[t]he summer winds and the monsoon rains dismantle the shelters of the poorer but fail to affect the Havelis." (ITH p.6) Signifying that the poorer are more adaptable and viable to accepting the demands posed by the changing times, while the aristocrats are unyielding, stubborn, stagnant and firmly rooted in the conventions. The description, at the same time, evokes mixed feelings of joy and diffidence, arising from the loss of the old splendour and the birth of the new, which comes at the expense of the cherished one.

The chapter scheme exhibits a superb schematic formula. The novel is divided into three sections. The chapter first of the first section forms the background by eliciting change arriving at different levels of contemporary society. Specifically, it demonstrates the confrontation between old and new customs and values. Whereas, from chapter second onward, the author expounds on the changing time appropriating the condition of women from Indian orthodox society. The birth of Sita and Vijaya ingrains the initiation of a new chapter in the lives of Haveli women. From this chapter onwards, the author makes Geeta the representative person who enables her to disseminate women's cause and the need for change.

Similarly, sections II and III postulate changing time absorbing the lives of orthodox people. The description offered in sections II and III is revealing. It says, “Five more winters had been added to the three hundred years of Jeewan Niwas. The whitewashed walls were a little more yellow; the mildew a little more widespread over the lime plaster, the iron-gate had begun to corrode with moisture. But the Haveli stood firm as if good for another hundred years. Inside the Haveli, life had changed.” [ITH p.85] It suggests that the orthodox culture has started giving in over the time, yet it has not succumbed to the all-encompassing change. Whereas, the section III displays the conservative society yielding completely to the demands of the time; it reveals the drastic changes that were taking place in social, political, economic and educational aspects of the society. It advocates the firm rooting of democratization. The description is highly implicative: “Five more years had been added to the life of Jeewan Niwas. Its lime walls were darker; the wooden doors more patchy and the marble more yellow; the filigree around the scalloped balcony was broken in more places, destroying the continuity of the design.” [ITH p.177]

The novel, specifically, narrates the stories of two women characters that experience change differently. The stories are obscure and evasive and make it difficult to distinguish between advancement and deterioration or emancipation and submission. The story of Geeta displays progress through submission to the tradition and whereas Laxmi suggests the degradation due to rebellion. One succeeds in defying all the odds; the other is crushed underneath. However, paradoxically, one achieves betterment without escaping subjugation and the other embraces degradation for liberation. The life of Geeta and other women characters reveal oppression, subjugation and even victimization of women in an orthodox culture. The stories of all these women suggest that the traditional ways of living cause a steady deterioration.

The depiction of the condition of women in the old and the new town exhibit the seeds of change covering different spheres of Indian society. The portrayal of women of different social castes and backgrounds in the old town demonstrates sorrows and sufferings engulfing women of all classes. The patriarchy is the root cause of evil here. It is represented as a privileged group, unnerved and unconcerned with the women's wretched and pathetic condition. Their situation reveals the hindrances that stumble in their way while obtaining desired goals or fulfilment. Moreover, the women belonging to the lower class suffer doubly here. Regardless, Rama Mehta foresees the rays of hope in the form of women of the newly emerging middle class living in well neat colonies. They are the representative of the liberating influence. Devoid of contact with the town, they wander freely on the streets and vendors like birds out of a cage without following Purdah. Their lifestyle is described in sharp contrast to the lives of women of Havelis. Compared to them, women of the Havelis are merely puppets. In a nutshell, the novelist uses the formula of contrast to communicate her message effectively.

The novel marvels in its artistic craftsmanship by introducing intricate plots mapping transitions at various levels. It involves the main plot dealing with the life of the protagonist and a number of subplots dealing with the lives of other women characters. Of all the sub-stories, the narrative account of Laxmi is vital; it is subtler and develops in contrast to the main story. It helps maintain the duality effect through which the author displays unobtrusive views regarding the status of women in Indian society. Surprisingly, the apparently simple novel then turns out to be more obscure and beguiling. The novel represents two stories, one that of an educated, modern girl succumbing to tradition without severe resistance on her part, and the other representing a poor and illiterate girl defying all the forces that oppress her. It is then obvious that Rama Mehta is expressing her anger rather disguisedly by holding patriarchy responsible for the misfortune of Laxmi.

The representation of characters is also in contrast. Though a modest, humble and rational individual, Geeta represents submissiveness. She stands for gracefulness, purity, delicacy, chastity, and reticence. As a poor, ugly, defiant, coarse, unfriendly and dissatisfied woman, Laxmi represents irrationality. She

stands for fiendishness and individuality. By arranging such a structural dichotomy, the novelist manages to attack the patriarchal hegemony.

Finally, the novel ends with an implication that change is consequent upon the struggle against hegemonic power. The characters and their author grapple with the dominant power represented by the orthodox tradition, patriarchy, and social and moral codes. The author through his characters and the passage of time appear to twist and bend every dominant element. In the position of utter domination, however, they learn to overcome the situation using myriad ways and strategies. The character of Laxmi enables the author to spread her message of equality for women somewhat obscurely. Her story projects the complex mode of battling against the male-dominating authority. Laxmi subverts the hegemony through defiance, whereas Geeta transforms the situation through sublimation. Hence, the means used by the character and the author are covert, disguising, disruptive, subversive, semiotic and sublimating. They have used these means to dethrone oppressive and unbearable conservative influences. 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 own 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]

Considered conservative in its espousal of traditional values, the novel tells a story of women's liberation. Though Geeta's story, it reveals a lack of direct opposition to the established power, whereas through Laxmi, it reveals the vandalising act that disrupts and subverts the authority. Hence, the novel becomes a powerful mode of female resistance to patriarchal power. Specifically, through Laxmi's story, it manifests 'a woman's escape from the prison-house of a poor marriage and subsequent attempts to achieve independence'. The novel represents a unique battle showing change and leading women to empowerment.

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Bio-Note

Dr. Sharad Chavan is an assistant professor working in MG V's Arts and Commerce College Yeola. He has more than 13 years of experience in teaching graduate and postgraduate students. He has completed his M. A. and SET and has completed Ph. D. from S.P. Pune University, Pune under the guidance of Dr. A. B. Pawar. He is now a research supervisor affiliated to Loknete Vyankatrao Hiray Arts, Commerce and Science College, Panchavati, Nashik.

He has published 10 research papers in peer-reviewed journals and two in Copernicus and Thomson Reuters indexed journal of international level. His area of interest has remained in literary theory and criticism and fiction. Many of his students have qualified for the SET and NET examinations.