

REVISITING HAVELI AND REDEFINING ZENANA AS A SITE OF  
SISTERHOOD: A STUDY OF RAMA MEHTA'S INSIDE THE HAVELI

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**Cite This Article:** Tuba Rashid, "Revisiting Haveli and Redefining Zenana as a Site of Sisterhood: A Study of Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 3, Conference World Special Issue 1, Page Number 178-182, 2018.

**Abstract:**

In the last five decades or so, Indian women novelists have developed an alternative canon of their own that aims to project and understand experience from the point of view of a feminist insight and sensibility. This has not only broadened the scope of the Indian English novel, but it has also attempted to restore the position of women by foregrounding typically Indian women's issues and thus exploring the nature of female world. Secondly, it has also focused on creating newer meaning/newer paradigms as attempts at a more authentic mode of self-definition than the one offered by literary convention. One such attempt is made in the paper to revisit the tradition of haveli culture depicted in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) and analyze position of women within the zenana- women-only spaces. The paper further deliberate upon on how zenana is seen as a site of sisterhood- a world of its own, as compared to a place that is traditionally marked as an enclosed space where females are confined and restricted within the limits of the haveli culture. In doing so, the paper also reflects on purdah as an empowering device, public/private spaces and the ensuing de-gendering of spaces.

**Key Words:** Gender, Haveli, Public/Private Spaces, Sisterhood, Threshold

**1. Introduction:**

Rama Mehta (1923-1978), a first generation Indian English novelist, has been primarily perceived as a sociologist who brings an intellectual vigour to feminist debates in her fiction as well as non-fictional works. Author of a single novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) for which she received the Sahitya Akademi Award, Rama Mehta has nevertheless earned a formidable reputation as a novelist. *Inside the Haveli* is something of a classic in modern Indian literature and continues to generate debate and discussion. Rama Mehta's feminist concerns as a writer become broader in scope when viewed in conjunction with her sociological studies of Indian women. *The Western Educated Hindu Woman* (1970), *The Hindu Divorced Woman* (1975) and "From Purdah to Modernity" are some of her seminal works on Indian feminist issues.

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977), a representative novel of Rajasthan's aristocratic set up, "gives an insight into the culture and history of Rajasthan and opens up several issues related to gender and literary aesthetics" (Agarwal and Talwar x). According to Supriya Agarwal and Urmil Talwar:

Perhaps she is the only woman novelist writing in English from Rajasthan who has given an insider's glimpse into the life of haveli in this novel and her use of space makes a definite statement about the position and status of women in the cultural history of Rajasthan. (x) [1]

The novel is itself located inside the haveli of an aristocratic family of Rajasthan, a family which is more concerned with the reputation and honour of the three hundred years old haveli and its customs than with the wishes and requirements of the people dwelling in it. Inevitably, "the narrative allows itself an immense degree of freedom" to explore issues like "the class differences, caste behaviour, feminine friendships across status, and feminine distances within the same class as well as the urban dreams, which the young bride brings to her matrimonial home" (Agarwal and Talwar xii). The novel revolves around the protagonist Geeta's backward journey from modern, metropolitan Bombay to traditional, aristocratic Udaipur when she gets married to Ajay Singh who belongs to a family of Rajputs in Rajasthan. One of the interesting features of the novel is the camaraderie that Geeta enjoys because of the Purdah- as a 'female-only' space takes centre-stage in the novel. However, there is neither a glorious-in-victory nor pathetic-in-defeat solution offered at the end of the novel.

Haveli- a symbol of tradition- is a Persian word meaning a large house or an enclosed space. Jeewan Niwas, an age-old haveli, like other havelis had one thing in common "the inside of the haveli or the *Rawala*, the segregation of the male and the females" (Sinh 24). It means the haveli was divided into two separate sections, one for males (*mardana*) and other for females (*zenana*)- that becomes a space to assess the position of women in the enclosed atmosphere of the haveli-culture of Rajasthan.

Traditionally, the atmosphere in *zenana*- female-only space, would promote patriarchal ideology among women as values of 'obedience' and 'subordination' were propagated. Women-to-women relationships are portrayed as hostile, for instance, mother-daughter relationship, where women cannot trust each other. However, with the advent of feminist theories this *private* domain is reanalyzed and perceived as a space that allows women to experience female bonding and gain a collective voice to realize their potential. Sisterhood involves shared sentiment where women choose to stand in solidarity to combat any form of oppression against women. The present paper will thus attempt to analyze through Geeta's journey, how female-only spaces that conform women within the high walls of the tradition-bound haveli can also be viewed as a site of sisterhood that promote female friendship and solidarity among women in the haveli. In doing so, the paper also reflects on purdah as an empowering device, public/private spaces and the ensuing de-gendering of spaces.

**2. Public and Private Spaces:**

In the words of Bandana Chakrabarty, "throughout the known human narrative, certain spaces have been culturally, religiously and politically marked as either 'male' or 'female'" even if the concept of Space is in itself boundless (148). The distinction between the two is further seen as public and private, or outer and inner. "The spaces referred to as public are assumed to be male and for centuries women have been excluded from the public sphere where all significant decisions relating to power

are deliberated and enforced” (148). While as the spaces referred to as private are assumed to be female and thus least significant. In continuation of this notion, Nancy Duncan’s explication seems very appropriate:

The public-private distinction is gendered. This binary opposition is employed to legitimate oppression and dependence on the basis of gender; it has also been used to regulate sexuality. The private as an ideal type has traditionally been associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, the ‘shadowy interior of the household’, personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, ‘the good life’, care, a haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence. . . (qtd. in Jagpal 28-29) [2]

Gender refers to the categories of social expectations, roles, behaviour, and values into which each body is placed. Spaces are not then marked as inner and outer or private and public, they become gendered spaces when we confine them as male-only spaces and female-only spaces according to the conventions of the society. In this context, Jagpal opines:

Spaces being gendered, the politics and allocation of space is invariably an implicit and intricate social construct of patriarchy that allows men centrality and access almost universally, whereas women are deemed fit only for the confined and secure spaces of home and family. (29) [2]

Women being confined to the inner or private space feel displaced as this no longer remains her exclusive territory since male jurisdiction and interference are constant factors to be reckoned with. This establishes the fact that, . . . space is not a rigid and static constant, rather it is subject to negotiations, challenges, revisions and alterations. (Jagpal 29)

The negotiation and tussle for greater spaces along the lines of race, community, caste, class and gender has been a historical fact and women also have been aspiring for their independent and secure spaces at par with men. (Jagpal 30) [2]

Modern Indian women writers too have questioned and revised this notion of gendered spaces by allowing their protagonist to ‘cross the threshold’ and mark their presence in the outside world which is otherwise confined to men. However, the depiction of women by Indian women novelists reveals how a woman is confined not only mentally but physically as well. Malashri Lal is of the opinion that ‘The Law of Threshold’ allows “multiple existences for men, a single for women” (Lal 12). Fundamentally, by threshold we mean an entrance or the point of beginning, but it can be defined “as the deliberate border line that determines the limits between the so called worlds of men and women through various injunctions, imposed and justified through ages by the society” (Jagpal 19). Traditionally, men have been given this privilege to cross the threshold unhindered and enjoy both the worlds, the one within and the other ‘without’, whereas women have been permitted to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries of home. It thus marks a strong sense of segregation of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and becomes a real and symbolic transition. If a woman crosses this threshold and steps outside, it is regarded as an act of transgression which does not permit her to re-enter her designated inner world and consequently make the outer world her permanent space.

### **3. Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*:**

Rama Mehta’s novel *Inside the Haveli* is a journey into the haveli culture of Rajasthan, particularly of Udaipur depicting a period of transition between tradition and modernity. It explores Geeta’s struggle to balance the weight of tradition with her modern upbringing that leads her to create a space of her own within the high walls of the haveli. It delineates how Space in the haveli is not only gendered and cultural, but geographical and hierarchical as well, and concomitantly how *zenana*/ women-only spaces can be seen as a world of its own- becomes a site of sisterhood.

Rama Mehta, in her novel, explores the haveli culture and delineates its impact on the development of women in the state of Mewar. She states in her novel:

The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. 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 men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women’s apartment. (*Inside* 6) [3]

Metaphorically speaking, the haveli represents an old tradition that has developed over a long period of time. The segregation of men and women within the haveli reveals issues of gender and class difference that is prevalent among the inhabitants of the haveli. Mehta states:

The servants of the haveli once slept wherever they found room to spread their mats but now they, too, have a courtyard of their own. Their quarters are not on the same elevation as the haveli, but a few steps below. (*Inside* 6) [3]

Space in the haveli is not only gendered and cultural, but geographical and hierarchical as well. In this context, Vaishali Naik in her article observes that the dynamics of space is fascinating throughout the novel. She says, “[s]paces inside and outside the haveli, the inside spaces in relation to each other, the space of haveli as juxtaposed with that of other havelis, the spaces occupied in marital relations, master-servant position and so on and so forth” (66-7). Though the concept of purdah occupies a central space in the haveli, dividing men from women, there seems to be a contrast between the lives of the masters and the servants in the haveli. The servant men and women mingle freely as there is no dividing wall to separate husbands from their wives. They live more freely as they don’t have to wait till the night falls to share their thoughts and feelings with their husbands. Thus a significant space in the novel is the courtyard in the haveli. This courtyard divides the haveli, on the basis of gender, into two sections- *mardana* and *zenana*. In this regard, Bandana Chakrabarty observes:

The novel explores the haveli as a gendered space. Gender is an analytical category for studying relationships among men and women that allows for understanding of those structural factors which influence female subordination and discrimination. Gendered Spaces are the ways in which certain spaces are seen to be occupied exclusively or predominantly by either males or females. . . . The haveli, in the novel, is an ambivalent space in that it is both enclosed and open. (148-9) [4]

On the one hand it facilitates the relation between the inhabitants of the haveli, and on the other hand it restricts the movement of women and men, especially women to remain confined within the four walls of the haveli and observe purdah strictly.

The first important question that Rama Mehta seems to raise in her novel is when Geeta is transported to the haveli of Udaipur, “[h]ow would such a girl learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of women, to give her elders the traditional deference?” (Mehta, *Inside* 16). This question becomes the backbone of Geeta’s journey from being a liberal, educated girl to the one who becomes the mistress of the haveli towards the end of the novel.

With reference to her formulations of *the Law of the Threshold*, Malashri Lal comments on the transitions effected by Geeta at three critical stages corresponding to the three sections of Mehta’s novel as:

The first journey is from the outer world of education, urban living and progressive views to the closet world of haveli entrapment and strict class distinctions. The second is Geeta’s strategic assertion of individual values (‘Sita must go to school’) while apparently submitting to the orthodox practice of decorum within the threshold. The third is Geeta’s troubled mediation between the old and new values which will decide her thirteen-year old daughter’s future as another haveli bride or a ‘free’ woman of the outer world. Fortunately, Rama Mehta leaves the story open ended, posing the dialectics of change on a map of dense social texturing (85). [5]

In the first section of the novel we observe Geeta, a Bombay born, educated, spontaneous girl of nineteen is perplexed and she complains about the haveli and its atmosphere. Restrictions imposed on Geeta to remain confined to the four walls of the haveli, not to express herself- her opinions and feelings- makes her feel claustrophobic. Geeta soon learns that in the haveli purdah is not only observed by women when men are around but within themselves, that is, a woman is supposed to cover her face in front of other women like her mother-in-law, aunt-in law, elder maid servants etc. In this context, Daphne Grace opines: [Mehta depicts here] “how purdah reduces women’s access to other women (since all cross-generational and cross-class contact or friendship is proscribed)” and thus women in purdah are “institutionally insulated from social change” (64). But when Geeta is transposed to this cloistered world of women, these constructs are questioned. In this process, it is seen that not only are the haveli and its orthodox customs are falling away, but concomitantly Geeta is also transformed. In this regard, Lal observes:

Geeta dons the purdah in deference to custom. Through the masking cover of the diaphanous fabric, she comprehends haveli events, participates in conversations and contemplates her proposal for reform without arousing too much opposition. The veil is her subterfuge, the necessary cunning of women who are denied power over others or even control over their own destiny. (93) [5]

Geeta observes purdah but she looks at it as an empowering device. Discovering positive aspects of veiling, she subverts the very purpose of purdah as she states:

She came to love the veil that hid her face; this allowed her to think while the others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them. (Mehta, *Inside* 23) [3]

Geeta observes that the segregation of sexes that promotes purdah among women has a positive effect, as according to Sarojini:

Segregation gives women protection and security- protection from the world outside, freedom from the oppressive gaze of men. The *zenana* is therefore for Mehta, not just “separate worlds”, but it has a “cocooning effect” on the women, who feel safe and secure from the onslaughts of the outside world. (“Ode” 54) [6]

This allows Geeta in the early years of her adjustments to the haveli, discern the subterfuges practised by the women. She is struck by the real power of women in the haveli behind the *show of powerlessness*. Though a maid, Pari holds the authority to guide and scold the young mistress Geeta for talking too much or not showing proper subservience to the traditions of the haveli. Besides her mother-in-law’s personality was such that it was difficult to contradict her. “A woman of power and status”, she functions as a “viable role model for she has ingrained habits of the haveli” (Lal 91). Mehta states:

It was due to her tact and her gentle persuasion that Geeta had been gradually drawn into the life of haveli without even wanting to resist it. (Mehta, *Inside* 31) [3]

Nevertheless, Geeta recalls how even if men were absent from the scene, they hold sway inside the haveli because nothing was decided without consulting them. Thus they were the masters and their desires were fulfilled without any delay. On the contrary, women were supposed to take care of household worries and their lives were confined to the *zenana*, rearing children, gossiping etc.

Comparing the living room of *zenana* to the one she sees in the men’s apartment, she observes “The room was cold and there was not the same kind of comfort as she had seen in the men’s sitting room” (Mehta, *Inside* 100). Even though the novel is largely governed by the presence of female characters inside the haveli, women are regarded as least significant. This is authenticated by Geeta:

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. . . . (Mehta, *Inside* 53) [3]

Nevertheless the *zenana* can be seen as a world of its own. Ranbir Singh opines:

The hustle and bustle of everyday work, the laughter and the cry of the children . . . the soft singing of the women at daily work, cribbing and jealousy, taunting by the elders, yet sharing the joys and sorrows, the *zenana* nonetheless remained a secluded place for the women, it did not have any contact with the outside world. (26) [7]

A secluded place like *zenana* however proves a blessing for women in certain ways. Meer Hasan in her book *Observations of the Mussulmans of India* (1997) draws a realistic picture of the Muslim *zenana* in the following words, which is true of the other *zenanas* as well. She says:

. . . they were happy in that confinement: and never having felt the sweets of liberty, would not know how to use the boon if it were to be granted them. As birds from the nest immured in a cage is both cheerful and contented, so are these females. (qtd. in Singh 26) [7]

Interestingly, when an outsider like Geeta is placed in this cage of the *zenana* it brings an opportunity of migration of these so called birds from the inside to the outside since the outsider will not accept this confinement and will bring in some change or reform that paves a way for the freedom of its inhabitants.



Having assessed the haveli traditions on this side of the threshold, “Geeta proposes reorientations of inner space in the second phase of her experiences. Outspoken and progressive minded, Geeta decides that Sita- a maid’s daughter, should also go to school. However, Geeta is unsure about her decision in case of Sita’s education, because she is aware that the maids would resent Sita’s going to school and she cannot replace the secure space that the maid community provides for Sita. This ambivalent attitude of Geeta towards life in the haveli arises from the conflict between her modern upbringing which makes her protest against the orthodox traditions of the haveli and her quest for freedom and choice-making which makes her question the placid acceptance of the women of the haveli of their suffering as “fate” and the will of God.

She further starts a school in the haveli for she anticipates that once young girls are introduced to the rudiments of learning, a process of social change will be set in motion” (Lal 94). Though the school that Geeta starts comes about by pure incident, it grows and cuts through class barriers in the social structure of the haveli which is established on class distinctions. Not only does it make possible for women to become economically independent, it also helps in bringing a good match for Sita. Alongside she also raises some important questions like,

How dare they say that these classes were an excuse for the women to shirk work? And what if they were, why should the young girls help in the haveli just because their mothers were servants of the haveli? (Mehta, *Inside* 167) [3]

Raising such questions within the tradition-bound haveli enables Geeta to break the conventions and emancipate women community to discover the ways in attaining an independent existence. As the children and women learn to read and write, “Geeta suddenly loved the large empty rooms of the haveli; they no longer looked unfriendly and haunted” (Mehta, *Inside* 161). The female-space within the haveli until now was recognized for carrying out the household work, but now *zenana* is redefined, as it promotes new ideals of independence and change among the inhabitants of the haveli. Naik observes that “the space that Geeta occupies is intersecting modernity and tradition, inner and outer” (67). She is negotiating both ways of life by introducing education as a tool of change within the haveli and concomitantly taking tradition along in terms of the pride and dignity the haveli holds.

Another advantage of the *zenana* is that there is a close bonding and strong companionship between the women of the haveli and in this way it becomes a site for sisterhood among women in the haveli. In the words of Bandana Chakrabarty, it becomes:

[a] space for sympathy as well as support in the gregarious community of women” (151). [4]

One significant point that the novel highlights is that though the enclosed haveli brings women together and provides the space to share their feelings and beliefs- a bond of sisterhood, but concomitantly the conditioning of the women in this haveli culture itself prevents such a possibility. On the one hand, within the haveli, there is a women’s community which has its own bonding and is supportive to each member irrespective of their age and status, especially on special occasions when they rejoice and celebrate. Also, the way Sita- Lakshmi’s daughter-is looked after by the maid servants and the mistress of the haveli, provides a fit example of close bonding and emotional companionship among the women inhabitants of the haveli. But on a deeper level, it is revealed that the form and courtesy they maintain lacks spontaneity and it is in the interest of the ‘name’ and ‘honour’ of the haveli that the women form a close community. This bond ironically prevents them from raising their voice collectively against the rigid customs and beliefs of the haveli and its traditions and thus rather than facilitating their status, it promotes surveillance and obedience to the system.

However, a unique feature about the position of women in the novel is that though the men are regarded with awe and treated as gods, yet Kanwarani Sa- Geeta’s mother-in-law “was a force that could not be ignored” (Mehta, *Inside* 21). In the words of Bandana Chakrabarty:

She managed the private space of the haveli effortlessly. In ancient havelis the women were the economic backbones of their households. . . . they took on the responsibility of their family’s economic maintenance as well as decision making. (151) [4]

But coexisting with this power is the powerlessness of the other women in the haveli, who Geeta finds “were like dressed-up dolls to be kept in a glass case for a marionette show” (Mehta, *Inside* 110). The women “behind the thick walls of the haveli had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets” (110). Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, it is within this constricted yet collective space of the *zenana* that Geeta manages to carve out a space for herself when she becomes the mistress of the household and the decision of Vijay’s marriage is her domain towards the end of the novel.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

To conclude, the space within the haveli wherein Kanwarani Sa (Geeta’s mother-in-law) wants to mould an educated woman like Geeta to the traditions of the haveli emerges as a space of rich possibilities for women empowerment and female bonding. This is evident in the ways Geeta gets carried away by the “emotional response to the solidity of family life, the close kinship patterns, and the nobility of her husband’s ancestors” (Sarojini “Ode” 54). A significant space in the novel *zenana*-witnesses a close bonding and strong companionship between the women of the haveli. It seems that through her character, Mehta is symbolizing the conflict between tradition and modernity as Haveli stands for tradition and Geeta for modernity. But since in the process both undergo change, Vaishali Naik observes:

Rama Mehta is trying to suggest that tradition and modernity are not always binaries. They could have a symbiotic, give-n-take relation as it happens in case of Geeta. (66) [8]

Consequently the public-private division is also transgressed by Geeta in the way she brings change within the haveli, becomes the mistress of the haveli and how decision of her daughter Vijay’s marriage lies in her domain. Geeta no longer feels trapped in the haveli as she carves a space of her own within the haveli, and establishes education and its consequent economic development as alterations in the ‘inner world’ of women.

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