

**RAMA MEHTA'S *INSIDE THE HAVELI*: AN EXPLORATION OF HINDU CULTURE.****Shri N. S. Warake**

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The renowned Indian English novelist Late Rama Mehta with her unique novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977), the Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (1979) explores the culture of Udaipur, Rajasthan in particular and of India in general by focusing their traditions, customs, beliefs, rituals, gender stereotypes, superstitious beliefs; and folklores. So far the novel has been studied from the point of view of feminism, post-colonialism, and patriarchal dominance by the researchers, scholars and critics. However, not much research has been carried out from the point of view of traditional Rajasthan culture which is one of the representatives of Hindu culture that has been depicted in the novel. Thus the intent of the paper is to focus on the traditional Hindu culture and some of its dominant exponents which have not ever been explored by the researchers, scholars and critics of the novel.

India is a rich land where multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural groups of people live together with very peace and harmony. Though, it has been structured according to regional languages, the culture varies from religion to religion. The people of varied religions including Hindu, Muslim, Shikh, Isai, Parsi, Boudh, Christian, etc. live together. Though the major part of India has been covered by the people who follow the Hindu culture, each group tries to restore their own culture. They are proud but anxious about their past and their culture. Every Culture that exists at all today has, of course, its own past. In order to understand Hindu culture, it is necessary to study established ways of Hindu people through their traditions, customs, beliefs etc.

Hindu culture is dynamic phenomenon that deals with artifacts and mores by which they (Hindu people) distinguish themselves from other religious groups. Being a sociologist Rama Mehta through her novel *Inside the Haveli* has depicted the real picture of Hindu culture of Rajsthan people. Rajsthan which is especially famous for its tradition of Haveli and the costumes for women as purdah or *ghungat* situated in the North India. Even in the post-modern era, many such conservative families like Bhagwat Singhji's in the novel are keen to preserve their age-old traditions, customs, taboos and mores.

The novel opens in Udaipur, the city which has the past ancestral history and hence it is divided into two parts that one belongs to the old one where many conservative families are living in the Havelis and small muddy houses in rural area; and other is urban area. The whole novel is revolving around the Haveli named Jeevan Nivas and the problems dealing with the people living in and outside of it. When the master of the Haveli, Bhagwat Singhji dies, his wife, mother-in-law of Geeta, the protagonist in the novel, consoles her by saying, "Binniji, ... don't cry, my child. Your father-in-law lived honorably. He has gone, leaving you the mistress of this house. If you loved him, you will keep this haveli as a trust for your children. He did his duty by us all. Now it is your turn..." In addition to this Manji Buasa to Geeta, by pressing her head to the breast says, "You are now the mistress of this haveli. You can't forget its traditions in your sorrow" (p.264). The dialogue visions the cultural transfer from one generation to another. The end of the novel is the real beginning where one finds the silent transformation of Geeta, the educated modern girl lived in metropolitan

city Mumbai. Throughout the novel, Geeta remains the silent listener and the bird watcher; and is always in flux that what is important whether the old traditional values of Rajasthan or the ways of modern living.

Sarla Barnabas appreciates that the novel “encompasses a microcosm of traditional values” (Dhawan et al. 1989: 245). A sense of Tradition is significant element in the Culture of any society. Hindu people carry out the various traditions that have been passed down from their ancestors’ centuries ago in their everyday lives. While underlining the importance of tradition in human life and the past feudal glory of Maharana, through the character of Bhagwat Singh Ji’s wife, Rama Mehta opines, “...they (the servants) had confidence borne out of hundreds of years of unbroken traditions... They were strong and even ruthless when it came to upholding family customs and ties. Tradition was like a fortress protecting them from the outside world, giving them security and a sense of superiority” (p.114). Due to these traditions, customs, the Hindu people come together and take part in activities such as Birth ceremony, marriage ceremony, funeral practices, and many more, which are the backbones of their culture.

One of the foremost traditions of Hindu’s is a joint family. To them, every member of a family has of supreme value. A person, who is head in the family shoulders the whole responsibility and takes care of all members in the family. His primary purpose is to keep harmony in the family. Being a survivor like a God, he holds power not only in his family but also in his community as a responsible man. Bhagwat Singhji, the head of Jeevan Nivas holds such an authority that he runs his family including many servants and their families living in his Haveli with peace and harmony.

On the one hand, when Laxmi, a mere servant in the Haveli, gives birth to a girl child is being celebrated by feeding to the whole community and by dancing, singing and wearing best clothes and when she elopes the Haveli for treason leaving her baby girl, a lot of efforts are taken in search of her on the other. This incident flashes on the importance of the life of each individual in the Haveli then that may be the master or servant. They are treated with love and courtesy. They care for each other. On the auspicious occasion, the servants are gifted with new clothes, silver, and gold too. Even they are being given the part of some of the lands to earn their living. They are supposed to be the family members as they are helped in their difficult time or an occasion like marriage ceremony. For instance, Laxmi’s daughter Sita is being brought up, educated equally with master’s daughter Vijaybaisa; and get married by offering gold to her would be husband. Even the master Bhagwat Singhji bears a lot of expenses of Sita’s marriage. In this sense, the master and the Haveli members keep the attachment with each other. Even the servants are respected and their sayings, views in solving certain problems are taken into consideration, which affirms that no discrimination is made between master and servants. In the novel, Pariji, the oldest servant in the Haveli is being respected with decision making power. Thus, it is said that if a man becomes a good conductor of his family, then ultimately he may become a good conductor for the society. And Bhagwat Singhji had such a prestige in his community that he had been recommended for the post of magistrate in his town Udaipur. He was also renowned as an ancestor of Maharana Pratap of Mewar.

The tradition of extended family gives way for many other customs, which Z. N. Patil has enlisted as taboos that governed the Haveli and made its inhabitants to conform to these norms. He has pointed out, “the North-South difference in attitude towards daughter-in-law. While brides in south have no such restrictions; in north they cannot talk with members of family directly. Daughters or maid servants are required to communicate the wishes of the two groups. The “authority taboos” enjoins on the married couple not to

demonstrate concern or affection. Even parents should not make a show of their filial love by kissing a child or caressing them. This affects consequent kinship in which verbal as well as non-verbal behavior are restricted. This also affects even “textile behavior” even among women; daughter-in-laws are expected to keep their heads covered” (Patil, 1989: 29). Patil’s view encapsulates the vividness of Hindu cultural taboos. Yet there are slight changes in the cultural traits of South and North or East and West, people are not ready to change their traditions, instead they try to restore them.

A number of other taboos that governed the Haveli are enlisted by the author such as blessings to youngers by elders, giving fruits and other gifts as *dakshina* to the priest, distribution of gold and other property to the heirs of late master except his/her daughters, the young maids are not allowed to go out of the courtyard until they get married, the child widows are not allowed to play like other girls as well as to get remarry, mourning period of thirteen days after the loss of the dearest one, keeping money and gold in wall or digging into land which can not buy happiness but it helps to make life a little less hard to live; and the feeding to the whole community on the last day of the funeral practice, etc. The tradition of singing and dancing on the festive occasion for instance, “Come on! Don’t act as if you have fresh henna on your feet... bribing evil spirit with a note of rupee from casting its envious eyes on youthful dancer” (p.37) shows the superstitious belief of traditional Hindu people. In Laxmi’s issue of elopement, the servants take help of Arjun, the fortune teller. The whole incident visualizes superstitious belief of the Hindu people.

Moreover, the language, names of people and places, food items, dress codes also play a significant role in the culture of a community. At the festive occasion the women use to wear bright, red, green and orange saris where as the widows wear black, the contrast of their saris with those of the married women like a blot in a spectrum of bright colours (p.33). In the novel, some of the festive occasions have been celebrated such as birth of Sita, Vijaybaisa as well as marriage ceremony of Sita. In traditional Udaipur, there differs language from other areas in India. The names called with suffix ‘Sa’ or ‘Ji’ for instance, “... everyone she (Geeta) met was either a Kaki Sa, Mami Sa, Bua Sa or a Bai Sa” (p.22), especially focus on respectful nature of Hindu cultural trait. Prof. Kanade opines, “There is not a single woman talking in harsh words to others they call to teach other not with the name but with the honourific names as Bhabasa, Kakasa, Bapusa... Even the maids also call to senior maids with respect” (Kanade. P.82). The names are not only building blocks but also have rich meaning behind it. The Haveli named Jeevan Niwas suggests dwelling place where life is happy. They keep certain name to a person and expect to behave accordingly. It is a trend in the Hindu culture to name the people by the names of their gods. Hence lots of ideas, values, feeling, emotions, myths, and philosophy are behind names, which aren’t merely a badge of identity. The name Bhagwat is supposed to be like God, Ajay one who is undefeatable, Sangram, one who can battle or fight; and Vijay, one who always wins. Even the names of servants Lakshmi and Sita suggest the names of Goddess of wealth and wife of Ram, the God. The linguistic elements such as the colloquial dialects, Hindu proverbs, culturally rich expressions, encountered in the novel are listed below:

• **Hindu proverbs and culturally rich expressions:**

1. ‘...Girls are a burden...’ (p.8) – Hindu people give more importance to boy as heir and girls are supposed to be tension as to grow and marry them without any blame.
2. ‘May you have eight sons’ (p.18) – means a newly married woman is blessed with having only sons that may help her to flourish her *Sansar*.

3. '... Reading and writing will not keep the rats from nibbling at the sacks of wheat' (p.26) – means it is better to learn cooking than learn to read and write.
4. '... May you always wear red' (p.33) – a kind of blessings given to a bride by elders to last long her happy married life and her husband should live until her death.
5. '...Real aristocrats do not change overnight.' (p.51) – means the noble men are generous and promising.
6. 'Only the truly blessed die still wearing red...' (p. 57) – meaning only the noble wife die as a bride.
7. '... Tears will distress the departed soul.' (p.57) – Hindu belief is that due to the loss of loved one if we cry and shed tears too much, the soul of the dead will hover restlessly.
8. 'Ram, Ram, Satya Hai, God is truth.' (p.59) – On the way to funeral the Hindu people use to say as God is truth.
9. 'Where is the rotten woman?' (p.69) – A kind of abuse that means a woman of bad character.
10. 'Men are men. They take advantage of the innocent...' (p.71) – shows male dominance in Hindu culture.
11. 'Bad temper was a person's worst enemy...' (p.74) – One should always be balanced.
12. '...in times of trouble it is men that count. Women are good only at shedding tears.' (p.74) – Meaning only men can face any danger where as women can't.
13. '...I was not born yesterday.' (p.143) – Suggests one is experienced.
14. 'Sita has been born under lucky star,...' (p.143) – Means one is lucky.

• **Colloquial words:**

1. Bua Sa, Kaki Sa, Mami Sa – aunt-in-law (p.17).
2. Bai Sa – a woman may be close relative (p.22).
3. Bhabha Sa – grandmother-in-law (p.24).
4. Maharani Sa – the queen (p.25).
5. Binniji – daughter-in-law (p.27).
6. Bapu Sa – brother-in-law.
7. Andata – Giver of bread (p.97).

The words such as Haveli, Jiji, Hukkum, Thali, Puri, Laddo, Sherbet, Rotis, Bara Bhabhi; etc. make the novel realistic one.

Thus, Rama Mehta through her keen observation of people living in Rajasthan particularly has successfully described the traditional culture with the detailed study of their behavior, language, ways of living life, manners, taboos; etc and in general documented the Hindu culture.

**References:**

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