

**Rama Mehta's 'Inside the Haveli: A Journey from Subalterns to Empowered Women**

**Dr. Neeta Satish Dhumal** Professor and Head, Department of English, Kamala College, Kolhapur.

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**Abstract:**

Women have treated as subalterns in the society. Until and unless they are empowered there is no development of the society. Women empowerment is nothing else but to improve the status of women in society through education, gender equality and economic independence. In other words, liberating them from all the aspects which subjugate and suppress them. It is the fundamental prerequisite for the progress of the nation and society without taking into consideration the importance of Women Empowerment there is no growth of any society and the nation as well. Awakening women to rise from their secondary, subaltern status and to arouse in them self respect is the fundamental need of the society. Education of women is another important decisive factor in the process of women empowerment. Rama Mehta through her novel 'Inside the Haveli' discusses these aspects in depth. Protagonist of the novel, Geeta, tries to uplift women from their secondary status and tries to awaken self-respect among them who have been living in oblivion of their original self. Educating them, imparting skills among them and finally making them vocal and independent is the journey from subalterns to empowered. Breaking away the shackles of age old customs and rituals is the toughest job but Geeta overcomes all the hurdles and sets her and other women free from the clutches of rigid patriarchal hegemony and empowers the women in true sense. Present paper explores this journey of empowering women.

**Keywords:** empowerment, gender equality, prerequisite, awaken, self-respect, patriarchal hegemony.

**Introduction:**

The term Subalterns basically refers to military in general it means 'of inferior rank' but generally it is used for those who are deprived of their rights; dalits, slaves, workers and women. They can never be powerful or privileged. It can be also explained as the people having no choice or voice of them. They are always suppressed and oppressed by the privileged. The fact is Women have been revered and respected in Indian culture but in reality they have been considered as subordinates who need protection and shelter of somebody. In the patriarchal society they have been neglected and are deprived of their fundamental rights. Therefore Women Empowerment is necessary for the overall development of women.

Women empowerment is a broader term which encompasses various aspects like accepting women's viewpoints, making an effort to seek them right identity and raising their status through their literacy. Education of women plays a pivotal role in the process of Empowerment. Literate women get liberated from the age old norms. They become aware of equal status in the society. Ultimately it leads towards better livelihood. It can be attained by imparting needed training and knowledge. Thus the empowered woman can take firm life-determining decisions and become able to overcome different societal problems. Through the process of empowerment capacity building of women can be attained. It will lead to greater participation, greater decision-making power. In the process of women's empowerment arousing women's sense of self-worth is the first and foremost important factor. Most of the times women are in oblivion state, they are unaware of their self. Therefore they do not have their own choices of their self and fundamental rights. Consequently

they cannot understand where the opportunities are. They do not have power to control anything including their position in the society.

Rama Mehta is well aware of the fact of the subjugation of women and their confinement within the four walls. Through her novel *Inside the Haveli*, she tries to make women vocal about their status. Rama Mehta was an Indian sociologist. She won the Sahitya Academy Award for her novel *Inside the Haveli* in the year 1979. It is a story of a Bombay girl Geeta who marriage into a conservative family changes her life completely. She has been a free minded girl and there was no restriction at her parents regarding talking with men or moving freely outside the house. “Two years ago when she (Geeta) left her parents’ home in Bombay, she did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women” (15). Actually she enters her husband's haveli with much surprise to see so many restrictions lead on women in the haveli. Against her will she becomes part of it but it is very difficult for her to maintain all the decorum expected by her family members. She has to keep *pardah* which she never had practiced in her life before that she always have been living with modern values. She has been brought up in such a family where there are no restrictions. Her parents are very progressive and she has been brought up as an independent girl. For Geeta her changed identity is quite troublesome and how she overcomes it is the story of the novel.

After getting married to Ajay she has to move to Udaipur. As soon as she gets off the train she gets her first lesson that how she should cover her face, follow *pardah* which is the first cultural blow to her. It is the symbol of veiling identity; she never had expected such a thing in her life which will hide her identity. It is a difficult journey of Geeta from modernity to traditionalistic ways of life. “In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquettes of the haveli” (29). While in Bombay Geeta enjoyed her life in her own way but at her husband's house she has to accept customs and traditions. As portrayed in the novel, women are molded in a particular pattern. It is supposed to be a sophisticate way to keep distance from men. Women are not allowed to talk with their male in-laws openly. Geeta is not allowed to talk with her father-in-law or grandfather-in-law because women in haveli are not allowed to talk so freely. Even male members do not enter the interior part of haveli at day time. In case of communication with them women have to follow *pardah*. Whenever Geeta wants to talk with her husband she has to follow this protocol which is very frustrating for her. She wants to leave Haveli and go to back to city but her husband is not ready to leave haveli.

According to Uma Chakravarti: Women are seen as irredeemably weak, feckless and over-promiscuous. The social structure and practice of language itself naturalize notions of appropriate and inappropriate female behavior. A society lives by to be constructed rather than given and clearly authorized by systems of patriarchal powers. (Chakravarti 134)

In the name of nobility and honor of women they are subjugated and the women become the vehicle to carry the burden of traditionalism. As it is reflected in the novel the roles of a woman is merely limited to giving birth to many ‘many sons’ and prosper the family and in turn she will also prosper. With this mentality women are living in the haveli. In being treated as the vehicle to give birth to children they do not find any impropriety. They are unaware of the fact that they do not have any significant role. Thus, Rama Mehta points out the wrong mentality of these women. It is a gradual and systematic process of moulding a newly wedded girl into an ideal daughter- in- law of haveli. Being always docile, accepting the rules and regulations calmly without questioning is the

ideal model of the daughter-in-law of the royal family. Their complacency in the molded role is very disgusting. For Rama Mehta the very attitude of looking at women is improper. Geeta is the mouthpiece of Rama Mehta. For Geeta everything is very strange; living in *pardah* even in the congregation of elderly women is not only disgusting but humiliating for her. Elderly women of *haveli* rebuke her. "There you go again attacking the *haveli*'s rules whether you like us or not it is here that you have to leave and do not you understand us the better.(91)

The very name of the *haveli* 'Jeewan Nivas' appears ironic when we see Geeta and other women undergoing a sophisticated captive's life. For Geeta, the figure of veiled Women in *haveli* is nonetheless a figure of captives. According to her it is the hegemony of patriarchal authority which does not allow women to move freely. They are moving in a circle of feudal system, they are exploited and their aspiration and feelings are suppressed. As an individual Geeta's quest for identity begins and gradually she strikes the ways of *haveli* in her own way. Even though, initially it had been an ordeal for her to accept the new norms, she adapts those in the course of time. Immediately after coming to the *haveli* she becomes passive she forgets her real identity for a while Geeta becomes voiceless and introvert. But soon she realizes her true self and tries to attain it back. Geeta observe the lives of these women which are confined to day today drudgery. She first of all becomes vocal for herself and quite openly talks with her husband regarding the dominating ways of *haveli*. He is kind and considerate he empathizes with her. He is the strong supporter of her' the only male in the *haveli* who understands the feelings of a woman. Geeta further seeks permission to do something for the women in the *haveli* and very willingly he accepts what she says. The first and the foremost elements in the empowerment of women is education. Geeta knows it very well so she tries to bring the reforms very gradually within the restricted walls. It is not easy to change the mentality of women so initially she attracts them by telling stories. Women start taking interest in those stories. Her next step is her insistence to send Sita, the daughter of a servant, to school. For which she has to seek permission of her father-in-law. It's a difficult journey for her because her mother –in- law is not happy with her decision, initially. Even the maids in the *haveli* try to demoralize her in their own way. Yet she remains adhered to her decision. Her quest for knowledge continues she expresses her wish to continue her education and thus she tries to to redefine gender roles.

Equal opportunity, inclusion, and nondiscrimination are important aspects in women empowerment. Geeta's next step is to include women in the main stream so she decides to educate women and inculcate in them importance of self-realization. She starts classes for the women in the *haveli*. Her very intention to strike back the dominance of the traditional ways is noteworthy. She is successful in breaking the ice of rigidity in the path of women's empowerment. Otherwise the women would be unable to start education by their own. Her urge for liberation is thus fulfilled to great extent. Geeta's struggle continues for a long time. She has to earn respect from the elderly women yet. They are the constant critics of her. Her mother-in-law is not very happy with her modern ways. Geeta wants to break everything which is harmful for her family's overall development. Early child marriage was one of the olden practices of the society. In the modern world such practices must be overthrown but in the *haveli* these are the common matters. Sita's early marriage is not appreciated by Geeta. She cannot stop this marriage but she puts forth the condition that even after the marriage her education should be continued and she is successful in doing so.

She does not want that her son's marriage should take place before completing his education. She wants him to go abroad for further studies. When there is discussion regarding Vijay's marriage the elders do not find it improper that Gaeta's son Vijay getting engaged so early but for Geeta this is intolerable. She tries to strike this norm of early marriage and she takes a strong stand against it. She tries her best to postpone the marriage and she is successful in doing so. She persuades her in-laws and they accept it and her son's education continuous as desired by her. Geeta manages to curb out the hampering traditional ways of thinking and becomes successful in establishing her separate identity in the stifling environment she has been plunged into.

**Conclusion:**

Her strong belief in education for women for their empowerment is proved right. Inside the haveli her struggle with the people who are the ardent followers of age old traditions, customs and norms is difficult. In spite of this grim situation Geeta becomes successful in maintaining a delicate balance between traditionalism and modernity the change never takes place overnight it goes through many reforms. Rama Mehta wants to foster the idea of self empowerment. According to her women must break the shackles of traditionalism. First and the foremost thing is they must realize their self and their status. The problem is they do not realize the fact that they are subjugated. Once there is awakening there should not be looking back. Geeta tries to establish this reality in them. All these efforts on the part of Geeta suggest whole beginning of women empowerment within the decided boundaries. Yet this is a commendable gesture leading towards women's liberation from traditional hegemony to modernity and from subalterns to empowered women.

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