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**Society and Tradition as Repressive Determinants of Women's
Individuality as Portrayed in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli**

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Abstract:

The term 'gender' is applied to the cultural aspects of male and female roles, In other words, the behaviours, personality and other social attributes become the basis of masculine and feminine roles. Subjugation of women in social institution is manifestation of patriarchal dominance that is chiefly governed by socio-religious customs and traditions. Purdah, institution of marriage and widowhood are some of the traditions that affect and suppress individual identity of women. Present section aims at studying representation of contentious traditions in selected literary texts, in this context, Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli is chosen for scrutiny as they come under the preview of the study. The life of women as portrayed in the novels narrates the influence of tradition and societal pressure on individual. First novel under the study represents various major and minor female characters caught in a conservative family. Present study is interdisciplinary in nature because it combines sociological research to study weight of traditions on women and feminist readings of socio-familial structures helps to comprehend number of issues that women face in gender biased structures.

Keywords: Traditions, Purdah, Reticence, Authority Taboo, Identity Crisis, Autonomy, "Angel in the House".

"Tradition is our link to the past – we need that link. Yet we don't want to get bogged down in the past... because practical living becomes impossible otherwise." (Deshpande, 02)

Tradition is one of the most vital factors that impart identity to humans across the world. According to Shashi Deshpande life and self both are pulled by two contradictory factors regarding tradition–change and non-change. One always remains in flux about accepting or rejecting tradition with changing times. Undoubtedly Indian Society is tradition bounded. It could survive through thousands of decades and remained affirmed even when other cultures try to dissolve into it. As it is explained in the oxford dictionary, tradition is "A long established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another." It also means "The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation or the fact of being passed on in this way." (www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/tradition)



Edward Shils provides an explanatory definition of tradition. He avers:

Tradition means many things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a tritium; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to present. It makes no statement about how long it has been handed down or in what particular combination or whether it is a physical object or a cultural construction; it says nothing about how long it has been handed down or in what manner, whether orally or in written form. (12)

Lata Mani also voices the same opinion regarding the meaning of tradition According to her:

Tradition is posited as a timeless and structuring principle of Indian society enacted in everyday gives of indigenous people. 'Tradition; interchangeable for the most part with 'region' and 'culture', is designated as a sphere distinct from material life. (116)

Above definitions throw light on the concept of social traditions. It is transmitted from past to present without leaving any kind of written records or traces. It mainly constructs customs and beliefs of the people. Religion and culture are part and parcel of tradition. Tradition is considered as intrinsic value of the living pattern. In Indian society, tradition is often regarded as the determinant of every action, rules and beliefs that is transmitted from succeeding to antecedents. E. Shils explains the working of the models provided by tradition. He says: "To act for example, as a "gentleman" or as a "hero" or as a "man", might all be intrinsically valuable patterns of actions but each succeeding generation receives the model from an antecedent transmitting generation" (32) Tradition is descended in every succeeding generation chiefly with intention to preserve and endure physical and mental health of the society. Tradition cannot sustain without society and vice versa. Both can be called two different sides of a single coin. Tradition helps the society to survive amongst the sands of time.

Indian society is highly traditional society which has gender-based standards for all. Without any exception Indian culture and tradition are male dominated one. Here societal norms and traditions act as major determinants in individual's life, especially when it is the case of Indian women. "A person is "good" and can become respectable only by doing what society demands no matter what values the society upholds." (Mitra, 72) In Indian society the complex and oppressive relationship prevails between women's subjugation, socio-cultural conditions and political power structures. Especially in Hindu culture feminine principles and traditions are interpreted in the context of each other and become interchangeable as women



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are looked upon as carriers of traditions. But tradition and society have created an exploitative social organism where women's position is subjugated. Sumanta Banerjee has remarked that "... in various part of Indian upper-class women, organized social activities do not develop till the second half of the nineteenth century; till then these women were restricted to pujas, utsavs, religious, festivals, and ritual functions like marriage and other ceremonies." (11)

Another conspicuous feature of Indian society is that it is dualistic and biased. Its basic nature is that of partial and has double standards. On one side it is appreciated for its flexibility and receptiveness while at the other hand these traditions are contentious and indignant. According to Pandita Ramabai Sarswati, a pioneer reformist and is considered as a one of the earliest feminists of India, Indian religion, "has two distinct natures in the Hindu Law; the masculine and the feminine. The masculine religion has its own peculiar duties, Privileges and honors. The feminine religion has its peculiarities." (58)

([www.forgottenbooks.com/readbook/The High Caste Hindu Woman __ 1000026726#87/6/26/2014/12.27](http://www.forgottenbooks.com/readbook/The_High_Caste_Hindu_Woman___1000026726#87/6/26/2014/12.27) p.m.)

This argument can be further extended to understand general biased nature of Indian society and traditions. As it has been discussed previously religion and tradition are inseparable factors of society that helps to build an exploitative system for women. Such hierarchical securitization of roles eliminates female to marginality. It cultivates patriarchal notions in the institutions of society and women remains deprived of access to power, position and recognition. It is only because of such traditional ideologies; she is expected to be extremely submissive and deferent. Mamta Malhotra throws light on the fact that how gender inequality affects identity of an individual. Betty Friedan, in her iconic work, has observed that: For a woman, as for a man the need for a self-fulfilment, autonomy, self realization, independence, individuality, self actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Women's sexual problems are, in this sense, by products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfil her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminism ignores. (282) As per her research on wives and mothers she realized the futility of the concept "the angel in the house." She realized that domestic work and lack of execution of outside world suppresses women's individuality. Women of Havelis in the novel Inside the Haveli comes under the similar framework.



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Subjugation of women in social institution is manifestation of patriarchal dominance that is chiefly governed by socio-religious customs and traditions. Purdah, institution of marriage and widowhood are some of the traditions that affect and suppress individual identity of women. Present section aims at studying representation of contentious traditions in selected literary texts, in this context, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977) is chosen for scrutiny as they come under the preview of the study. The life of women as portrayed in the novels narrates the influence of tradition and societal pressure on individual. First novel under the study represents various major and minor female characters caught in a conservative family. Present study is interdisciplinary in nature because it combines sociological research to study weight of traditions on women and feminist readings of socio-familial structures helps to comprehend number of issues that women face in gender biased structures. For centuries Indian women have suffered through the suppressive traditions. Rama Bai aptly observes:

Closely confined to the four walls of their house, deprived throughout their lives of the opportunity to breathe healthy fresh air, or to drink in the wholesome sunshine, they become weaker and weaker from generation, their physical statures dwarfed' their spirits crushed under the weight of social prejudices and superstitions, and their minds starved from absolute lack of literary food and of opportunity to observe the world. (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 96)

Purdah or keeping veil was not an ancient Indian custom but was introduced later with an intention to keep women safe. As it is observed by Katherine Mayo; "Purdah, as this system of women's seclusion is called, having been introduced by the Muslim conquerors and by them observed, soon came to be regarded by high caste Hindu as a hall-mark of social prestige." (90-91). For the sake of maintaining higher social standard and prestige women were kept in seclusion. It had devastating effect upon their self image and they were customarily deprived of any trivial sources of dignity and self respect. Main motif of such tradition seems to keep women on fringe while men are provided with all resources to struggle for their identity and thus to achieve their manhood in gender conscious society of India Jeanette pinto observes that "the status of the Indian woman, however, deteriorated from the fourth Century B.C. onwards when Alexander the great invaded India.... with changing circumstances and the fear of the lust of invaders and conquerors women were generally kept in seclusion. (30) Gradually seclusion of women becomes a compulsory custom for aristocrat people. "Purdah and total veiling of women were foreign to original Islam, but both were considered as a mark of aristocracy in late Islam." (Ehrenfells 126) This Islamic tradition was adopted by high caste Hindu as aristocratic women were free from hardship of household or farming. While poor



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women could not maintain Purdah easily with their daily ordeal of chorus and thus they were saved from this suppressive tradition. But they were not put on high pedestal by society as they did not adopt the purdah system. J.H. Hutton states that “purdah is alien to Rigveda and is also alien to Dravidian civilization.” (157) while defining purdah, Harlan writes that “parda”, which literally means “curtain”, refers to the seclusion of women within the house hold parda keeps women from being seen by men who are not members of the household. With parda the world of women literally becomes the world of the household.” (Halan, 11)

Even though purdah gives women seclusion that is on physical level only, it has long lasting effects on thought process. Deprived of outside world and resources, women’s world is dismissed to household. Under the name of safety, women are not granted to have education or higher education. This leads to the lower status of women. Limited preview of outside world has crippling influence on their psyche that these women become unreceptive to the changes and any kind of modifications. Single motif of senior ladies in household becomes to suppress other inferior female members of the family. Dr. N.N. Parekh also opines:

Ignorance and the purdah system have brought the women of India to the level of animals. They are unable to look after themselves, nor have they any will of their own. They are slaves to their masculine owners. (Quoted in Moyanagh and Forstell, 95)

But it is regardless to say that tradition of purdah reduced the status of Indian woman to a household object valued for decoration only. The effect of such a contentious tradition is very well described by A.K. Tiwari As he puts it “Purdah is an accommodation to and a means of perpetuating the perceived differences between the sexes: the male being self reliant and aggressive, the female weak, irresponsible, and in need of protection.” (27) Elizabeth white too comments in a same emotion that:

The purdah is an instrument of masculine effort to keep independence in women.... The conformance to the norms of the purdah restricts and limits the role of women, keeping them within the confines of the jenana apartments and keeps their status low.” (34)

Elizabeth white too comments in a same emotion that: women are not oppressed into a “geographical ghetto” (Robbins 58) so their oppression is not recognized easily on the contrary it remains hidden and it takes ages to realize individual or collective loss. Tradition and society play a dominant role in women’s oppression, women are unable to recognize their suppression and marginalization because:



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Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat... they live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands more firmly than they are to other women. (Beauvoir ,19)

Beauvoir is very much right when she asserts that history remains regardless to women as she is kept deprived of identity. Her identity and individuality is neglected with such an ease that women functions as serotypes only. Alka Saxena notes that,

" right from the earliest times to the present, women have been struggling to find a respectable place for themselves. On the one hand, it is said that the lot of women all over the world is the same. Only the degree of their suppression varies from place to place and time to time... women have been exploited by men in all ages. From Hardy to Hemingway, the desirable woman portrayed is one who is passive and subservient" (19)

Pardah system has not ended in India even today. Rural and urban India this tradition is followed by so called traditional.

Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli narrates the wind of changes, a smooth conflicting yet strong and swift change from tradition to modernity. The novel elaborates vivid description of a life, especially women's life living behind the four walls of Haveli. Traditions, customs, etiquettes are cleverly crafted in the narrative design of the novel that prevails in a Rajput family, once having a glorious history of feudalism. Through the character of Geeta, the protagonist of the novel, Rama Mehta has triumphantly exemplified that one cannot survive without traditions in India. Even though a close study of female characters and their way of living, thinking in the novel indicates that sometime age old tradition can be hurdle to individuality, to progress, and to emancipation specially at the part of women. This study also focuses on the life of minor female characters which help to note that how society and tradition suppresses individuality of women. Present novel also raises some question like one (especially woman) can't remain happy without following the traditions? Does the customs like purdah should be sustain by the society?



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Geeta, a Bombay bred and highly educated girl has to marry Ajay Singh of Udaipur who himself is a professor and yet rooted deeply in the tradition of Haveli. "She has to struggle much to carve out her own identity in the male dominated Indian society." (Mishra, 53) As a daughter-in-law of haveli she has to meekly compromise with suppressive traditions that exploit female individuality. Noteworthy thing is that here female herself becomes instrumental to her subjugation without being conscious of it. Another reality, the novel, points out is that here male domination is not imposed by male but the female of previous generation pushes next generation of female towards blindfolded acceptance and practice of age old traditions.

At her very first arrival at Haveli, Geeta comprehends the fact that "the haveli represents tradition, narrowness, servitude of women and shackles of freedom" (Mishra, 53) From here her conflicting journey initiates as being sophisticated modernized girl her rational cannot accept traditions told to be followed by her in-laws. The very first tradition she encountered was of keeping veil, "Purdah" in front of either ladies or men. At the railway platform, after marriage, in a welcome ceremony, Geeta was rebuked with following words: "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world? (IH, 17) Soon she was informed that in Udaipur women keep purdah. Even after spending many years at Haveli, Geeta never felt comfortable with tradition of keeping purdah. She was brought up in a very different atmosphere. Her college education had taught her to express her notions and wills freely and so was encouraged by her parents. At Haveli, a total contradictory condition knocked her psyche. Certain Indian critics like sarla Barnabas finds tradition of keep in purdah as feminine modes of conduct. She establishes that the various restriction imposed by social system was not only for women but for men also. Wearing turbans and churidars in public were called etiquette for man while women had to cover themselves in veils. She adds that across India, the sanctity of purdah was equally respected by men, as by women. (275) But keeping purdah in daily routine and being only a spectator is a different thing. Only a victim can know how suffocating it is to keep purdah! As it is noted by Purdah "has been viewed as another ingenious device akin to feet binding (China) and chastity belts (Europe) to keep women not only spiritually but physically immobile. (12) It has also been noted by Patel that, "The system of Purdah is designed so cleverly that women are deprived of enjoying even free elements of nature such as fresh air and Sunshine" (69) Violating any such feminine code of modesty leads to a catastrophe on woman along with social exclusion and separatism. Geeta, being modern girl questions the tradition of purdah yet does not have enough mental strength to oppose it. Once Geeta enters by chance to the apartments of men where she observes "the finely chiseled faces framed in neatly groomed beards



seemed to be looking down as guardians of the haveli.... their hands with long tapering finers wore rings, the wrists, bracelets; from the neck fell heavy enameled necklaces studded with precious stones." (20) The forefathers of her husband. Here simple question arises that if women are supposed to keep purdah even in front of other women than how their such a grand portrait can be available in haveli? What if the succeeding generations wants to see his/her grandmother or great grandmother or great great grandmother? Women are said to be the keepers of culture and tradition. Aren't they worthy of recognition of their succeeding generations? The whole custom of purdah has very long-lasting effects on identity of victim. Woman gradually loses the sense of individuality.

In the haveli men are considered as masters and women, their shadows. Women are not allowed to talk freely to men; not to even their husbands. Geeta, in the depressing atmosphere of four walls of haveli, longs for the company of Ajay. He realizes Geeta's need and occasionally visits women's apartment. Centuries of traditions have made women most scarifying, unselfish and self-denying, ultimately losing their individuality. They are so much absorbed in following blind folded tradition, which are patriarchal mainly, that without realization they become vehicle of exploitation of other women especially the younger generation. Geeta found these haveli women domesticated, superstitious, family oriented, religious, uneducated and victimized. Rama Mehta has realistically presented psychological condition of tradition bound women:

They seemed like little canaries in a cage who sang and twittered but seemed to know no passion. Their large eyes full of yearning and longing looked dreamily on the world beyond from behind their veils. Though young, some unknown fear seemed to have eaten away their natural exuberance. They followed the traditions of their families at the bidding of their elders, but they lacked the same faith or commitment to it. It seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when they would be freed from their confinement. (IH, 87)

Indian woman, being tradition bound readily lose her individuality for the well-being of the family by sacrificing her happiness and desires. She is particularly conditionally perseve by the conventions and under the pressure of family prestige she wouldn't dare not to free herself from predominant role in family. Geeta also longed for her previously enjoyed freedom in contrast to her present traditional role. Geeta makes comparison between simple village women shopping at market and wealthy women at haveli. She find village women more happy and contempt. These simple women were not greedy as haveli women. Haveli



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women are never satisfied because they always had some competitor from other Havelis. "Geeta envied the village women who walked proudly away from the shops..."(HI,109) Notable thing is that us customs and traditions are implemented to higher class women only. Even though these women rode in a car which is a luxury they have to hide their faces behind purdah. While the village women walked freely on street with their faces uncovered. The higher class of women never developed the sense of rebellion in the novel. Geeta, though educated and highly disapproving of certain traditions of haveli, was suppressed by other women. While maids belong to lower class so survival is their burning question yet rigidity of custom suppresses them. "Women behind- thick walls had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show". (IH, 110) Truly said these "dolls" are controlled by the strings of tradition and society.

Even though men are blamed for patriarchy in general, women are also to be accused as they without rebelling dominates the weaker and younger women of the family. Thus indirectly they not only, supports but sustains patriarchy in a household. It is observed that in Inside the Haveli male members are not much concerned with little matters but it is mistress and senior maids that rule the younger generation of women. This woman is as Uma Parmeshwaer observes:

Inculcated with the ideas of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of sita, savitri, Gandhari etc.... Following these models, she is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and faithful as a wife, and selfless loving and thoughtful as a mother. (2)

Never get into argument with the women in the haveli" we are all mean. The men are generous and understanding. They look beyond our little world".

Women of the haveli have chosen imprisonment of four walls deliberately where they can't "look beyond little world". Neither they want to free nor are they letting other free from this imprisonment.



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