CHAPTER-IV

VEIL UNVEILED:
INSIDE THE HAVELI
I remember the surprised delight with which I first came upon Rama Mehta’s novel and encountered the freshness of her prose, the simplicity and tenderness of her evocation of an ancient and traditional way of life, and the understanding she brought to it.

-Anita Desai

**Inside the Haveli** (1977) is the only novel written by Rama Mehta and has won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979. It is the story of a Bombay born and brought up educated girl Geeta. She is married into an aristocratic family that resides in one of the admired, renowned and old havelis of Udaipur. The novel *ITH* is a typical novel that maintains strict authenticity to the life it represents.

Rajputana- the land of the Rajputs, the chivalrous class with a royal glorious past has innumerable examples of the feminine power in the image of Padmini, Raj Mirabai, Rani Hada and panna Dhai who have carved a niche for themselves by proving their mettle and rebellion in some way or the other in the history. The legacy of them is continued till the modern time. One such example is Geeta, the protagonist of *ITH*.

Rama Mehta herself is both a novelist and a leading sociologist. Her insight into the lives of women is based upon her own experiences of life in Udaipur (Rajasthan). Her novel is written based upon the information from one of her non-fiction texts *From Purdah to Modernity*. It is a fascinating study that reveals Mehta’s concern for women and her region’s coexisting and conflicting trends of the time. The purdah in conflict with modernity forms the crux of the novel *ITH*. The novel also portrays the educated protagonist’s journey towards consciousness
and realization. The existential predicament of Geeta in a male centered and patriarchal haveli highlights the narration.

The novelist makes an attempt to focus on the struggle and consciousness of women in post-independence India. Like the protagonist of the novel, a number of young educated women after their marriage are shuffled into an entirely different and contrasting atmosphere. In this new atmosphere they are isolated and segregated from their new family members. They are bewildered under the pressures, demands and expectations of their new roles and their in-laws. Despite this, many of them succeed in retaining their self-respect and carve out their own space through sensitive efforts and consultation. Geeta is one of them, since she succeeds in her negotiation in her in-law’s house. Geeta’s attitude and her decisions in her marital home provide a suitable substantiation for women’s education which ultimately proves that even a single educated and coherent woman can become the base of a social change.

The novel depicts not only the brave attempts of the protagonist Geeta to liberate herself from inherited cultural and social bonds but also her endless struggle to transform haveli from prison to some liberated and expressive environment. Geeta believes that liberation is the measure of the women’s agency and selfhood. In the struggle of liberation for women, awakening consciousness often plays a key role, to get rid of the suppression. The novel locates Geeta in the present and, from the present she is able to recollect her nostological experiences - as these experiences are connected with her urban life of freedom in Bombay.
The opening scene of the novel starts with the description of Udaipur rather than the protagonist. Rama Mehta wants to show the changed life style of the Indians. “UDAIPUR WAS ONCE the capital of the state of Mewar; now it is only a town like many other towns in Rajastan.” (3) Udaipur has been divided into two parts as ‘Old city’ and ‘New township’. The culture of the ‘Old city’ of Udaipur has uniformity because of the common history and heritage. The new township, developed beyond the four hundred year old bastioned is an example of the latest scientific and modern outlook. Its inhabitants feel intrigued by the gigantic and splendid structures of the old city and mazes hidden therein,

There is no way they can look into the courtyards; the windows are so high that no one can look through them. The town people leave the old city, without having fathomed what goes on inside men’s and women’s apartments of the haveli. (5)

The ‘old’ part of the city is inhabited by ‘traditional people’ where as the ‘new’ part is inhabited by the ‘modern people’. So the people living in these parts are completely segregated. The haveli, Jeewan Niwas is located in the ‘Old city.’ It has been divided into different parts for men, women and servants. In the haveli the women apartments are located based on hierarchy, the marital status and the status of their respective husbands. Moving from their concerned places is strictly restricted:

The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The court yards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained was
necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within their apartments...The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women’s apartments. Even so no man entered the court yard without being properly announced. (6)

The servants of the haveli have their separate apartments and courtyard with lower elevation that provides them free movements and scope with all freedom: “In their courtyards there is no dividing wall, the maids are free to talk to their husbands; they don’t have to wait till the darkness of night settles over the haveli to share their thoughts with them.” (6) Irrespective of the caste, class and gender discriminations, the inhabitants of the haveli safeguard collectively their old customs and traditions.

The protagonist Geeta enters this patriarchal, tradition-rooted haveli as a daughter-in-law. After the marriage Geeta starts her journey not only to the new place but also to the new circumstances. She feels isolated in the train itself. “Bombay seemed so far away; her mother was not within a call; and she was alone in the compartment with a man she hardly knew.” (16) Geeta’s first experience in Udaipur itself makes her aware of the fact that she has to live by accepting its strict and rigid codes of haveli. As soon as she puts her foot on the platform “She was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. One of them came forward, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, ‘Where do you come from that you show your face to the world.’” (17) For Geeta veiling of her face is the suppression of her individuality but realises that she has to learn to be behind the veil.
Nearing the city gate when Geeta lifts off her veil to see, immediately Pari, the head maid of the haveli snaps the sari over her face and says: “‘No, no, you cannot do that. In Udaipur keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.’” (17) Geeta realizes that as a daughter-in-law of the haveli, it is essential to draw a veil not only on her face, but also on her exhilaration and individuality. She even has to surrender to the rigorous and conventional ethnicity of the haveli. This marks the beginning of Geeta’s life inside the haveli.

As soon as she reaches the haveli, the haveli women come in order to have a gaze at Geeta, the bride, she remembers one of them saying “She has good strong features but she is dark. Let us see how she adjusts. After all she is educated and on top of that she is not from Udaipur. What a risk to get an outsider, especially there is only one son.” (18) Really it is difficult for Geeta to adjust to the new environs, since she is from the different cultural background. Even Geeta’s parents feel that: “Geeta had been differently brought up. She had gone to college and studied with boys. How would such a girl learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of women, to give her elders the traditional difference?” Geeta is given full freedom in her parents’ house, till at the time of her marriage her mother advises her “Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don’t talk too much.” (16) Geeta’s parents prepare her and advise to be adoptive in her in-law’s haveli. Geeta tries to be an ideal daughter-in-law but her modern views come into clash in the haveli.

Geeta observes that all the women in the haveli lead a mechanical life and they identically perform assigned roles and duties. Geeta wonders when she:
“noticed that all the women, young and old, had their faces covered even when no men were in sight. The only women who moved around freely with faces uncovered, she later discovered, were daughters of the family. At that time she was wholly confused by the mass of covered faces.” (18-19)

Jasbir Jain in her article, Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah, states:

The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah reinforces the idea of female subordination in built in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology. (243)

The custom of purdah not only endorses these women but advocates and occupies a naturalized part of their life. Meera Hasan description of the Muslim zenana correctly suits to haveli’s purdah: “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 are both cheerful and contended, so are these females.” (167) Geeta very soon identifies Jeewan Niwas as the place that is deep rooted with Patriarchy and its traditional norms but gets adopted to the style of living like the birds in the cage being cheerful. Geeta cannot help but compare Jeewan Niwas with her parents’ house:

In her parents’ home men and women talked quite freely, her mother respected her father but did not hide behind a screen when his friends were present. But in the Haveli, men were
regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care.

(21)

Geeta’s feelings in the haveli are explained by Umesh S. Jagadale as: “Geeta experiences a cultural shock, as she undergoes a cross-cultural journey from the unorthodox culture of her parents to the conservative culture of the haveli, where she is married off.” (107) Geeta’s husband Ajay too finds “the segregated way of life in the haveli oppressive. Geeta was a companion to him, with whom he could talk and discuss.” (21) But he is not in a position to bring any change in the haveli tradition since “he was not prepared to do anything to challenge his father’s authority, whom he admired and respected.” (22) So, Geeta is totally caught in the rigid structures of the haveli. Further Geeta observes in the haveli “Everyone was waiting to find fault with her. Yet, if she was to do things right she needed advice. The pitiable thing is here that she cannot share her feelings even with her husband as “she saw him in the night.” (21) Haveli women are restricted to spend the time with their husbands during the day time. So in the first few months of her married life “Dhapu, was her only friend and guide.” (22) Geeta understands that in the haveli all her freedom is lost.

Geeta transported from the open metropolitan culture of Bombay to the gigantic walls of an orthodox haveli in Udaipur, is restricted into double veiled existence. One is the separation of the male and the female world. The second is lack of personal space and solitude because of her living under the hierarchical etiquette. So Geeta feels loss of freedom of movement, speech, thought and sight.
Geeta finds herself suffocated and dejected in the haveli. Geeta feels that the environment is new and doesn’t suit her. Malashri Lal explains Geeta’s situation as “Marriage brought Geeta from the outer world of modernity to the enclosures of the threshold.” (101) She finds that pleasing her mother-in-law is a very difficult task since she is strictly addicted to the aristocratic rules and regulations. So, Geeta is twice removed from the centre as a woman and as an outsider of the haveli. She is marginalized of the marginalized, one is because of her gender the other is because of her education and modern attitude.

Geeta mourns on her loss of freedom and longs for the independence that is enjoyed by the low caste women maids in the discriminatory culture of Udaipur. Left with no option, Geeta starts her negotiation with her new circumstances that provides her new consciousness. Her real self gets highlighted as instead of just fuming and fretting, she slowly learns to convert her existing situation to her favour. She finds freedom under her veil: “To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them.” (23) Veiling becomes an overt symbol of masking of inner emotion for her and thus, she succeeds in retaining her psychological space.

Even after two years of her marriage, the mother-in-law finds her insufficient in following the laws and customs of haveli culture and instructs her:

‘Do not talk too much to your young cousin-in-law, it’s not becoming. You know the women are critical because you are still clumsy. I want to show them that even educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my only son.’ (30)
Amidst these suffocated situations Geeta gives birth to her first child Vijay. Bhagwat Singhji decides to celebrate Vijay’s birth. During these celebrations “Every one was afraid she would embarrass them by an indiscreet word or a faulty move.” But her mother-in-law shows her concern for Geeta “‘Binniji, I know you don’t eat properly when there is confusion around you. As soon the women sit down to eat, you come upstairs. I will have your thali sent up.’” Geeta understands that “Though she was strict she was not uncompromising” but has care and affection towards Geeta. It is because of her affection she “had been gradually drawn into the life of the haveli without even wanting to resist it.” (31) Geeta’s mother-in-law:

“is an obedient and submissive daughter-in-law; an unquestioning and uncomplaining wife; a caring and loving mother; a broad-minded, large-hearted and considerate mother-in-law; a proud and affectionate grandmother and a very generous and compassionate mistress of the haveli. With all her short comings, she is a kind and good human.” (Shivani R. Upadhyay 80)

In the haveli, the head of the family has immense power to implement anything on the family which is undeniable. While executing his power, often the head of the family overlooks the inconvenience of the family members and makes the decisions as it is the traditional norm. The freedom of choice for women is hardly expected especially in Jeewan Niwas. Going against the patriarchal power of domination is not that easy for Geeta:
In the two years Geeta had lost much of her exuberance but still she was unable to control either her words or her feelings. She was still capable of talking frankly with her younger-in-laws. Because of this her mother-in-law kept reminding her of the importance of reticence. (33)

It indicates that Geeta alone intends for a liberty of her own. Patriarchal in-laws are representation of power and on the other hand Geeta is a representation of liberty. Geeta wants to seize a female space by challenging the archetypal, patriarchal and multitude bondages of traditional patriarchal society.

There is a gradual growth in the awareness of Geeta. She gradually starts to get back women’s space by breaking the chains of the patriarchal domination. So she herself gets ready to raise voice while it is needed. Geeta’s existence in this closed world of haveli compels her to accept it as the only way of respectable living. So, she accepts the discipline of the haveli without protest. Even then there are many times “She was filled with rebellion and her face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the haveli.” (205) Dr. A.G. Khan rightly avers that “Mehta deserves commendation that she did not allow her protagonist to succumb to stagnation or helplessness.” (43)

Geeta notices that the kitchen and the courtyard are the only prescribed spaces of women’s activities and these are also regulated according to the needs and desires of the men in the house. Like in traditional households, even in the haveli no woman takes food till the men have been fed and satisfied. The men are given utmost respect “Though to her only names, their presence was felt everywhere in
the haveli. Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires the whole routine of the house revolved.” (19) The female courtyard is the place where women share their feelings for one another, and also express themselves freely during the festivities of happiness and sorrow. Even in this courtyard, the free expression of women is restricted and they have to subdue their voices when the men enter. Geeta is surprised to notice that during the celebrations of the birth of the first grand-child Vijay, all female activities are suspended at the very moment of the entry of men and “As soon as the men left, the women relaxed; their voices rose again; they started where they had left off.” (34) In contrast to this the male courtyards are practically beyond bounds for the women.

Geeta is rankled and disturbed about the “male privileges” of food and entertainment. She comes to know from Dhapu, the servant maid in the haveli that men are provided with extraordinary entertainment like singing and dancing on special occasions on high payments “She takes five hundred rupees an evening and only sings for men! She is not like those old women with cracked voices singing inside our courtyard.” (40-41) Women are also provided with entertainment but the singers are not as good as they sing for men. They have cracked voices. Mehta reasons for the men’s privileges: “In the haveli the men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care.” (21)

Inspite of these gender biased conditions, Geeta starts getting adjusted to the new environment with the co-operation of her husband and her mother-in-law. Though her mother-in-law, Kanwarni Sa is strict she has a caring concern towards
Geeta. At the same time there are moments when that Geeta feels frustrated and strongly defends when her personal maid Dhapu, instructs her not to show affection towards her new born daughter in the presence of others, she bursts out: “Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here… I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don’t tell me what I should do with my own child!” (32) Geeta is irritated with the scorns, superstitions, taboos and double standards of the haveli culture. But there are also the moments when Geeta is filled with pride for being a part of the haveli, watching men during the celebrations:

Geeta stared at the scene below as if hypnotized. Even though Udaipur was no longer feudal state the traditions of Mewar seemed safe in the hands of these stern looking men, all of whom seemed to composed…These were good people ,gentle, kind and chivalrous. Looking at the men below she forgot her daily irritations…How could she allow little discomforts to blind her to the great traditions of the family. (40)

Geeta doesn’t feel tradition as meaningless fuss any longer she feels pride in the culture of the haveli at the same time she wants to bring certain modern ethos into the traditional life of the haveli. “Although Geeta gradually gets used to its life changing herself in the process, she also subtly changes her immediate environment and the people concerned.” (Srinivasa Iyengar 753) Geeta is able to discover that as the respect and authority attached to age and hierarchy is too deep-rooted in the system, she avoids the direct confrontation. So at first, she binds by the ethos of the haveli. Raj Prabha depicts the hierarchy among the women as:
The authority of the mother-in-law over the daughter-in-law was quite firmly established. The young daughter-in-law had to abide by certain traditions and restrictions. She had to keep her face in veil before her mother-in-law, father-in-law and the other elder-in-laws...She could not talk to them directly...Even the personal Davrees (maids) of the mother-in-law, grandmother-in-law etc. had to be shown equal amount of respect.” (44)

Geeta decides to bring change in a subtle way and starts her negotiation. Geeta’s subtle opposition comes to the scene during her refusal to accompany her husband when he proposes a visit to the lake. At the same time it is also indicative of the precautious restraints that she exercises on herself lest she should be subject of others’ ridicule. She articulates her resentment to her husband and instills guilt in him for betraying her limited and suffocated existence in his house. Her outward compliance has a touch of bitterness that her husband is well aware of. As it is noticed “He understood that Geeta was trying to hide her own frustration at living in a constricted atmosphere so as not to hurt him.” (53)

In the process of negotiation, Geeta gives a new equation of partnership and mutual sharing. Unlike other traditional women of the haveli she never accepts the submissive stance. Geeta considers Ajay as an equal partner rather than God of her life though the other women of the haveli consider husbands as their gods. She expresses her anger and bitterness in no uncertain terms when Ajay conveys inability to shift to Delhi University. She cynically contests:
'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...in fact, I don’t even see any point in being here. I may as well go and stay with my parents. You won’t miss me; there are hundreds of people to take care of you.' (53-54)

Geeta at last realises that: “her husband was too rooted in the traditions of Udaipur. To leave his parents would be impossible for him at a time when his father needed him.” (54)

Gaining some confidence, Geeta gradually starts resisting the intrusion first into her personal space and refuses and stops to veil herself in her own apartments. Her small feats like spending money on books indirectly through her husband and decorating her rooms that differs from the rest of women apartments reflects that she has retained her inner space. She creates a physical space exclusively of her own. In Mona Domosh and Joni Seager’s opinion: “the home is one of the few sites of women’s prerogative. Home decoration expresses not only a woman’s taste but her moral standing in the family and the community” (43) aptly suits Geeta’s situation and her state of mind. She creates ‘a room of one’s own.’

Eight years after her marriage Geeta becomes mother of two children. It is noticed that though Geeta decides to bring change in some of the traditions of the haveli, she herself undergoes some changes:

She had lost much of her girlish impetuosity; her temper was more subdued. She had gradually forgotten her own carefree girlhood, in which there had been uninhibited laughter and
freedom. Though she still kept a little apart, Geeta had become more and more involved in the routine of the household; she accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest. (87-88)

Geeta manages to mould herself to live under patriarchal rule. Still Geeta has restless, unending quest for identity. Geeta seeks an explanation of life through a study of her own feelings and responses as a modern woman. This modern attitude of Geeta is identified by women of haveli as ‘‘Binniji is different,’ said Pari, ‘She is educated; she has the other things to occupy her. Gossip is for those like us who cannot read or write. ‘There was a slight trace of sarcasm in her voice.’’” (88)

Despite restricted situations, Geeta is successful in her endeavour to register her distinctive presence within the prescribed limits. She determines: “What if I cannot trace my ancestry beyond my grandfather? That is no reason why I should surrender?” (100) Though sometimes, she is attracted and fascinated to the grandeur and intrinsic human values of the haveli and its inhabitants, and feels pride being a part of it. Yet she doesn’t get ready to surrender her individuality completely. A.G.Khan fittingly remarks: “Mehta deserves commendation that she did not allow her protagonist to succumb to stagnation or helplessness” (44) in the haveli.

Geeta puts her effort to bring change in the haveli women. She observes that these women like to live as nameless and faceless and to live under the thresholds of patriarchy. So, Geeta says to Ajay: “‘You don’t know the women here; they are all rooted in ignorance and superstition. For the slightest thing they run to Arjun the fortune teller, even though he was so wrong with Lakshmi.’” (137) During Geeta’s visit to the other havelis she observes the life of village women and compares the
life of them with the women of haveli. She finds the fact that the later women though they live a life of grandeur, they do not have liberty like the village women. The women behind thick walls have none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed-up dolls kept in a glass case for a puppet show. Men though remain in the background and women play the central part, yet the presence of men is all pervasive and invincible: “Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved.” (19)

This tolerance and submission of women community to the patriarchal system is possible in case of illiterate, aged, socially and economically backward women. But for Geeta it is strange even to witness this behavioural pattern as she is from a large section of elite and educated women of the society. Because of their illiteracy and economical dependence the women of the haveli have submitted themselves as helpless victims of social system. So they continue to live lives full of drudgery, deprivation and discrimination. The situation that prevails in the haveli is entirely different from that Geeta has experienced. But Geeta “knew marriage meant going into unfamiliar surroundings, but she was not afraid. In her youthful confidence she believed that with love she could win over anyone, anywhere.” (32) Now, her desire is to change the lives of these backward women.

A quality common among this class, however, is that they not only stick-on to their conventions and restrict themselves but also promote the same for others due to religious enthusiasm. They are stubborn and don’t like to invite any change in their life-style. They are unable to tolerate if their counterparts try to violate the
dictated norms of patriarchy. This diffusion and maintenance of the deep rooted conventional female psyche is well reflected in the novel:

They never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feelings. 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 lives. Though young, some unknown fear seemed to have eaten away their natural exuberance. (87)

In the beginning, Geeta too was with the hope that she can leave for Delhi where she can escape from traditional bonds of the haveli. When the years pass the dream of leaving Udaipur dies in her heart. She makes up her mind to stay in the haveli. She becomes a silent worker to bring about a change at least in the lives of the girls inside the family and also outside. Geeta’s decision of changing the lives of the poor is well described by Malashri Lal: “Mehta points out that upper class educated women must provide the leadership to those born in less privileged conditions. For this they may need to sacrifice some of the modern principles of liberation that they could have grabbed for themselves.” (101)

Geeta starts the reformation with her decision of sending Sita, the daughter of Lakshmi, to school. A great scuffle breaks out with her decision. But she is stubborn in her decision and says to the head maid of the haveli: “Pariji, Sita must go to school.” Pariji, replies “Binniji, you do not yet know Udaipur and its customs. Sita has to marry. Leave her to us, the servants. We know what is best for her.” (98) This reaction is reflected in glowering silence of every maid servant. It is
because they are much adamant to invite any change in the already existing pattern of their lives. Pariji is against the idea of educating a low class girl child, like Sita because she is with the opinion that “a girl who has to live in the village must be sturdy. She cannot be pampered. Her limbs must be strong to pull water from the well, to plough the fields, collect the cow dung. As it is Sita is lazy. You send her to school and she will begin to think she is a little lady.’’ (99) Moreover they feel that education remains as an obstacle of the girl’s chances of getting married in future. Geeta’s mother-in-law is also with the same opinion and she tries to explain Geetha that Sita will be proved a good handmaid for her in future but if she goes to school, “she will never take a broom in her hand.” (118) Even Khyali the cook of the haveli, bursts out angrily: “Does Binniji think just because we are servants she can do as she pleases with our children? Let her try and send a daughter of mine to school and see. Yes, you can do what you like with boys but to expose a girl to the world! Never!” (126)

The rejection of education shows the rigidity of the patriarchal traditions that prevails in the haveli. Especially the concept of educating women is protested with harsh and loud voices of inhabitants of the haveli. This protest is an example of deep rooted gender inequalities naturalized in the very consciousness of these people of the haveli. Almost all the upper class women are also against the probable uplift of a low class child. They are with the fear that they will lose the domestic help in future.

Geeta gets a chance to win the battle with the help of Dhapu. She tells Geeta secret, “‘Never get into an argument with the women in the haveli. We are all mean. The men are generous and understanding. They look beyond our little world.’”
(104) So, she chooses a convincing manner rather than challenging the established norms of the haveli. She decides to get her father-in-law’s approval. Geeta’s father-in-law, Bhagwat Singhji supports her decision, he says Pari: “Education is a good thing. I know it is not the custom in Udaipur to send girls to school. People are afraid of marrying educated girls. But times are changing; after all, it is better to be in school than play in the streets.” (103) Geeta is filled with love and sense of gratitude for him. Because of the haveli’s etiquette, she is unable to express but she feels: “Even after seven years I am stranger to those that are mine, and I always remain stranger.” (105) M.J.Aarthi and N.P.Kalaivani describe Geeta’s state as “Her initial awe and fear of her parents-in-law turn into respect and devotion towards them, when she finds them considerate, affectionate, flexible and accommodative.” (18)

This incident generates such a furore even in other havelis and makes Geeta feel guilty and ambivalent about her decision of providing education to the servants. In spite of all these problems and struggles she succeeds in sending Sita to a charity school. Sending the girls of poor families in Udaipur is considered as an emblem of the changing socio-cultural conditions. In addition to providing education to school, Geeta starts classes for the destitute in her own apartment. She not only allows access for others to her rooms but also narrates them the realities of the outer world. She trains them to meet the challenges beyond the confined and secure inner spaces. She dismantles the class and caste distinctions as the daughters and daughters-in-law of other havelis also attend her school along with the maids and their children. At the time Geeta starts teaching women of all classes of society, there is a lot of
resistance from servant folks and complaint about the disadvantages of education for women. Geeta’s mother-in-law receives complaints from them:

‘Kanwarni Sa, my niece’s husband is already fed up. Before going to work he has to eat cold rotis left for him because his wife comes to here to listen to stories; is that what a woman should do?... Hukkum have you heard that the engagement of my brothers daughter has been broken off; who wants a girl who is already defiant?’ (162)

Their criticism does not dampen Geeta, and she is determined to empower the servants and their children through education. With the support of her in-laws and her husband she is able to provide education to Sita and Ravi. She herself runs her own ‘school’ and teaches servants, their children and the daughters of the Haveli. For those who find it impossible to read and write, Geeta starts sewing classes and engages a woman to teach them to cut and embroider. The substantial effect of all these efforts is that they get economical independence. In the beginning Geeta is strongly opposed and criticized by women from other havelis for teaching the servants. Manji and Nandu complain that education is “making rebels out of our servants.” (165) Pari recognizes the undertone of complaints, “their own daughters and daughters-in-law come and sit for hours with Binniji Geeta. It’s only the poor that they prevent from coming” (191) because they have to depend on the havelis. Geeta is stubborn in changing the lives of these girls against all the criticisms she encounters. Here lies the victory of Geeta when she is admired by everyone for providing the education though she is criticized for the same in the beginning. They express their delight by saying “which one of our daughters or
daughters-in-laws has brought the gift of learning to the poor.’” (151) The noticeable thing is that Geeta is recognized as the ‘haveli’s greatest ornament’ by her patriarchal in-laws.

Though Geeta is criticized in the beginning for imparting education to poor children and maids later she is praised for the same. Geetha gets appreciation of Manji Bua Sa: “‘I am glad you are bringing new ideas into the haveli… It is time things changed. Once we, the old, are dead, the havelis will no longer survive. It is no good living on in the past; for the sake of our children, we must look to the future.’” (115) Many of the upper class havelis women turn against Geeta’s act of educating girls. They are filled with anger and anxiety. It appears ironical to note that the same women seek advice from Geeta in case of their sons’ education whereas girls’ education remains a banned subject. This shows the gender bias of the women of the haveli. Geeta’s mother-in-law takes part in rescuing her daughter-in-law as she is under severe criticism from other havelis. Though she is neither convinced nor happy about Geeta’s decision, yet she accepts it dutifully to implement her husband’s decision so she says

My husband has been thinking for some time of sending the servants’ children to school, even the girls. You know as well as I do that havelis can no longer give employment to the servant’s children. Times have changed. It is our duty to prepare them for the future. (114)

This incident can be looked at not only as a rescue of Geetha but also as Geeta’s victory to win her mother-in-law. “In the process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any she induces her mother-in-law
with a feeling of warmth towards modernity.” (A.G.Khan 44) So, education is proved as one of the best channels which provides the wider knowledge.

Geeta’s act of teaching the sewing skills to the women reveals her belief on the economical independence of women. The importance of financial independence is quoted by Nehru “Freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political, and if woman is not economically free and self-earning, she will have to depend on her husband or someone else, and dependents are not free.” (220) Sarojini appreciates Geeta’s view of providing economical independence through education:

Geeta’s attempt to educate the women of the haveli was not only undertaken to awaken a social consciousness but also to empower them economically. Since the haveli would not be able to support the maids for too long, they have to be equipped to find employment elsewhere. Her willingness to stay on in the haveli is because she finds a positive role to play in ushering in an era modernization. (53)

Malashri Lal too expresses the opinion “Mehta points the leadership to those born in less privileged conditions. For they need to sacrifice some of the modern principles of liberation that they could have grabbed for themselves.” (101)

Geeta brings another remarkable change is to cross over to the male part of the haveli unattended or addressing their male relatives directly. Geeta’s merit and her capabilities are recognized by her father-in-law and she gets the concession to enter the male courtyard and talk to him directly in the absence of outsiders. Geeta
is not a traditional mother who feels duty-bound to initiate her daughter in the much-trodden path. So, Geeta decides to provide a fair chance to her daughter in the choice of her future life partner when she grows up. Geeta envisions the replay of her own life story and gets all the more anxious. Her sense of insecurity is not intensified for her daughter’s future alone, it also makes her to envision the replay of her own life story so she becomes more anxious. Vinay Kripal states her bewildered state:

There is considerable conflict in Geeta’s mind as a result of the proposal. After the preliminary courtesies, Geeta is left free to take her own decision. Her mother-in-law realizes the limitations of her hold on Geeta and leaves her alone….On the one hand, she is disposed accept because of the merits of the case. On the other hand, she is inclined to reject it because it would mean reverting to an orthodox way of life. Her dilemma is very real. (185)

Inspite of all these achievements, Geeta is also attracted to the rich values of haveli. Ultimately Geeta feels:

“I don’t want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds. Where else in the world would I get this kind of love and concern? The children must go up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house.” (170)
Geeta wants to change another cruel custom that prevails in the haveli that is child marriage. This custom is deep rooted in the haveli. Geeta’s mother-in-law comes to the haveli as a child bride of less than thirteen. The very victim of this custom is Pari, who is married at the age of ten. She enters Jeewan Niwas as a child. “Two years later she was married. But after fifty years she could recollect neither the day she was married nor the day she became a widow.” (9) Lakshmi, another maid is married at the age of fourteen, whereas her daughter Sita is married at the age of thirteen. Even the grand-daughter of the haveli, Vijay has no exception. She is planned to be engaged at the age of thirteen.

Geeta’s daughter’s marriage proposal provides one of the major situations of her resistance. Geeta’s modern attitude comes to light when she strongly disagrees to the proposal of engagement of her daughter, Vijay, at the tender age. In this connection she says to her mother-in-law “‘Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can’t get engaged at this age.’” (205) Though the bride groom is a well-bred, educated young man from another Haveli. Geeta strongly says “‘I won’t agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child…I will never agree to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in a college.’” (206) She tells her husband that she cannot “‘be fooled again. I know nothing matters more than money and prestige to you all.’” (207) She makes it clear by informing “‘My daughter’s marriage is my concern. I will never agree to Vijay’s engagement like this, no matter what happens. Even if it were the son of Maharana of Udaipur, I would not agree’ replied Geeta.”’ (215) This firm decision of Geeta is described by Sunanda Bose “Her initiatives against the cultural paradigm were hostile also to the thought of Vijay’s marriage.” (3) At this early age. She could not allow the in- laws
to take the greater control of Vijay’s marriage. At the outset she thinks that the union with the rival Haveli through marriage is a vital act, to her in-laws and they do not bother about the sufferings of Vijay as a child bride in the haveli. She does not accept the proposal inspite of the persuasion of her in-laws, though she rethinks it towards the end of the novel. It is with determination and modesty that she tackles the problem of child marriage. In Geeta’s character a harmonious blending of the positive phases of tradition and modernity is seen. Geeta brings a compromise between the forces of traditional and modern forces. She communicates successfully with the patriarchal forces and becomes a torch-bearer to bring the change.

However her father-in-law’s ill-health, assurance of the continuation of Vijay’s education, a visit to the proposed groom’s haveli and the meeting with the boy mystify her and she cannot stop debating the brighter aspect of the proposal in her own mind. Moreover she realizes that unlike her Vijay has been born and brought up in the haveli culture, so Vijay does not find difficulty in setting into another haveli as she has the exposure to the same life before her marriage: “mothers are ‘great permission givers’ but when the mother does not allow the daughter ‘separation’ from her, and infuses her with her own’ fears’, refuses to let her grow and tries to keep the symbiotic relationship beyond the psychologically advisable limits, the relationship is particularly damaged.” (Nancy Friday 88) In this particular case, the recognition of separateness of her daughter from her own self solves the impasse.

Considering the stringent conventions and traditions of haveli, it is a great achievement on her part to participate in the decision of her daughter’s future. She
succeeds in condemning the child-marriage of her daughter. Thus Geeta evolves as the real female protagonist who not only succeeds in carving out her own space but also becomes instrumental in bringing about a symbiosis among the old and the new traditions. When the novel progresses Geeta also gets transformed. After her father-in-law’s death Geeta:

was struck with wonder. Her heart filled with pride and admiration for the man who was the father of her husband. All of a sudden she realized what real greatness means. He was like a towering tree under which the family sheltered...the saplings growing up as its base were exposed.

The haveli might never again be as strong. (262)

Geeta bursts out in tears and gets into high sorrow, for which her mother-in-law consoles her and reminds her of her duty, “Don’t cry, my child. Your father-in-law lived honourably. 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.” (264) So, she determines to gain the inner strength to move forward to bring reforms and she takes the responsibility of the Jeewan Niwas as its new mistress after the death of her father-in-law. She determines to fulfill the responsibility whole heartedly and with all her capacity. She is metropolitan, spirited and educate girl succeeds in carving out her space and gets fulfillment within the confines of the haveli. In describing Geeta’s victory Jasbir Jain quotes:
As each struggle leads to a new one and another frontier is opened, women have changed their strategies and moved from reasoning to protest, from silence to articulation, from insanity and ostracism to self-assertion and confidence. In the process they have also had to explore their strengths and weaknesses, their sexualities and relationships and negotiate the barriers of patriarchy. (22)

Further in the novel, through the character of Lakshmi Mehta proves that, it is not only the high class, educated women who have the guts to revolt and face the repercussions, even a maid servant like Lakshmi can challenge the male authority and fights for her self-respect and dignity as a wife and a human being. Lakshmi discards the manifold concept of security provided by the confined and restricted spaces walls of the haveli and departs to carve out her own space and identity in the outside world. Disgusted by the insensitive attitude of the haveli women and the scathing remarks and allegations of her husband on her chastity, Lakshmi leaves the haveli never to return back. Sudha Rai understands her position and says “Lakshmi is angry because she has no control over her life, given her status as a dependent servant and the judgmental attitudes of many individuals in the haveli towards her.” (125)

Lakshmi decides to revolt so she leaves her husband and infant daughter on the night she is beaten and charged by her husband of loose moral character and disloyalty by her husband. Her husband’s accusations, “You are a cheap woman. I never want to see your face again. You are a street woman,” (71) compel her to
rebels openly and leave home. The matriarchy is challenged by Lakshmi when she decides to abandon her infant daughter, Sita, to take revenge upon her husband.

Lakshmi even sacrifices her motherhood to withhold her honour and self-respect. It is a challenge to the popular belief that motherhood works as a binding force on women. She has chosen the contrasting path by burdening her husband and haveli women with her infant daughter’s care and responsibility in order to take revenge. Sudha Rai recognizes the hidden attitude of Lakshmi:

Despite her mental status, she spurns the haveli’s values of wifehood, motherhood, and decorous behaviour and shows up the discrimination practiced by the upper class, the underside of their nurturance. For this, she is generally judged as ‘unfeminine’. In leaving the haveli, she takes revenge on an order that has taken her for granted, marrying her off to a pockmarked husband with a crooked nose, whom she is unable to love or respect. (124)

Lakshmi confronts Pari and Khyali when they insist her to come back home. She scorns at Pari’s suggestions. Malashri Lal appreciates Lakshmi’s decision: “Angry and distraught… unjust abuse, she… steals away to the city to make another kind of life, dangerous but self-sustaining… Lakshmi is determined to carve an independent future even by rejecting her maternal instincts.” (98) In the novel, Lakshmi is the only woman who moves away from her two-dimensional subjugation: The subjugation due to her class and gender. She challenges the rigid
behavioural norms by crossing over the threshold of patriarchy to safeguard her dignity.

In the novel ITH Geeta and Lakshmi who cross the patriarchal thresholds in different ways, Geeta do not out rightly reject the security and the warmth of relationships and community as she belongs mostly to aristocratic Hindu family. Lakshmi who is from the servant class gets the chance of choosing her own style of living due to her courage and rebellious attitude.

The novelist describes the two characters on similar lines. Geeta seeks independence at the same time aspires for the roles of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother and finally the mistress of the haveli. In case of Lakshmi, she loses her status and security to gain her freedom. At the end of the novel Rama Mehta depicts Lakshmi as homeless and destitute as a punishment of crossing the threshold of patriarchy like Sita in Ramayana for crossing the lakshmanarekha. Geeta pities with Lakshmi and seems to understand her quest for self-respect and dignity. All the other women of haveli accuse her of rude behaviour. Lakshmi for crossing the threshold once, is not allowed to the same position and capacity. Jasbir Jain explains the public attitude:

A consciousness of public opinion, of narrowing spaces, fear of ostracization all act as controls…There is no free choice and there is no turning back, once the threshold is crossed. The likely social disapproval, the possible consequences as projected by Khyali and the others are part of the social psychology. (180)
Struggling and fighting against the odds Lakshmi loses her family. She is refused even by her brother. Ultimately it is found that for rebelling against patriarchy, survival becomes not only difficult but also threatening in the boundless space of male territory. She is labeled as a ‘street woman’ in spite of her consciousness and her quest for self-respect. It is interesting to note that Lakshmi prefers the life of a destitute rather than that of a passive slave.

In the novel Mehta provides the complete image of humanity by portraying Geeta as a humanist in action. She is able to modify tradition and reorganize the social forms. She herself undergoes change and brings about a change through her deeds. This modern, educated woman, belonging to the upper class of society, educates the other women metaphorically as well as spiritually. Thus she becomes responsible for the arousal of “feminine consciousness”. Geeta finally emerges as a humanist by showing the path for the other women to free themselves from the constrained realities of their lives. She is successful in bringing a positive change by means of education, protesting against child marriage and gender discriminations. She opens new horizons of possibilities arousing a sense of self-worth and self-esteem in women. Interestingly, Geeta carves out her position within the four walls of her home by choosing the way of harmonious blending of both the old and the modern traditions.

At the end of the novel Geeta approves herself as an individual by putting an end to her fears about herself. She is able to hold her own in a household full of tradition-bound, royal, admired, noble and well-mannered members of her family in the haveli. She breaks traditional ground whenever it is necessary which is a proof of her individuality. She takes complete care to delineate her presence as one shows
it with bravery and confidence of rationale and accountability to be the mistress of the haveli. She emerges as an intelligent, impressive and wholly practical woman by choosing concrete ways rather than theoretical ways. The novel ends neither with the victory nor the defeat but of accordance and indulgence that explores Geeta’s consciousness of realization and matured psyche. Srinivasa Iyengar praised the novel as:

a sensitive piece of realistic fiction, even an authentic sociological study, and it is written with a naturalness and poise that are disarming and effective at once. The evocation of scene, character and especially of atmosphere is almost uncanny. The balance between repose and movement is well sustained, there is romance but no cheap sex, there is tension but no violence, and there is a feeling for the values verities. (753)

Geeta brings about a silent revolution in the haveli. She does not make the family a battle ground. She achieves what all she aspires through patience and perseverance. Finally, Geeta transforms the prison into a sweet home and says “I don’t want to leave Udaipur now.” (170) Traditions are not to be considered as chains but have to be taken as ‘strength and security’. Mehta does not allow her protagonist to live in helplessness behind the veil but she makes her reconcile herself and move forward to win the hearts of the family who are deeply groomed in traditions.

The novel ITH is the story of Geeta who harmoniously moves from silence to reformation, unveils the suffocated lives of women who live behind the veil. The
next novel The Color Purple portrays the female bonding which makes the women move from silence to rebellion.