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Volume - 12
## SVU Journal of English Studies

### CONTENTS

1. **Analysing Ideology in films Critical perspectives in Todd Hayns far from Heaven & Sankar's Anniyan**
   - **Raja Sekhar, Patteti**
   - Page 1

2. **Portrayal of war in Hemingway's Short Stories**
   - **K.Madhu Murthy**
   - Page 6

3. **Changing Modes of Tradition and Modernity in Telugu Literature**
   - **M.Narendra**
   - Page 14

4. **Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's TARA**
   - **D.Ramesh**
   - Page 22

5. **Varieties of English British English Vs American English**
   - **V.Sudhakar Naidu**
   - Page 30

6. **The Efficacy of a process oriented approach as a motivational strategy**
   - **P.M.Usharani**
   - Page 44

7. **Authentic Realities of life: an Approach to Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long Journey**
   - **S.Shanmuga Priya**
   - Page 49

8. **Impact of Mahatma on Mulk Raj Anand**
   - **Ferozbegum**
   - Page 57

   - **K.Vishnu Divya**
   - Page 62

10. **The Politics of Marriage in Margaret Atwood's "The Edible Woman"**
    - **M.Usharani**
    - Page 69

11. **Teaching Spoken English to Rural Students**
    - **R.Vidyadhar**
    - Page 79

12. **Arun Joshi's The City and the River - An Ecocritical Perspective**
    - **R. Deepta**
    - Page 86

13. **Humanism of Tagore : Discovering our own Divinity**
    - **R.Manjula**
    - Page 92

14. **A Woman's Complete Journey Towards Self-Realization**
    - **K.Dhanalakshmi**
    - **G.M.Sudaravalli**
    - Page 97

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Volume - 12  iii
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Fictional Art of Anita Desai</td>
<td>G.Hampamma</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Empowering Students with Communicative Skills: The Role Of Listening in Second Language Acquisition</td>
<td>A.Hari Prasanna</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>To Tell a Tale</td>
<td>Chandra Latha</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Learning Language Through Literature</td>
<td>Ch.Radhika</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason as a Critique on Globalisation and Migration</td>
<td>C.Naresh M.A.K. Sukumar</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Culture: Indian Woman</td>
<td>P.Kusuma Harinath</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Image of Woman in the fiction of Jhabvala</td>
<td>S.Prasada Rao</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Language Learning - The Role of Multimedia Lab</td>
<td>Y. Aruna V.Ravinaidu</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>A Sense of Suppression by Halfness in Hal a Life</td>
<td>A.Madhusudhana Rao</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Treatment of History in Manohar Malgonkar's The Devil's Wind</td>
<td>A.Venkateswarlu A.Hariprasanna</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Quest for Truth: Gnostic Paradigms in Thomas Pynchon's Novels</td>
<td>Mutyala Suresh V.Ravi Naidu</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SVU Journal of English Studies*
Scholars believe that in Ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. However, some others hold contrasting views. Works by ancient grammarians Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig-Vedic verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband. Scriptures such as Rig-Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Matreyi. The research studies carried out, show that women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later, the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (esp Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women’s freedom and rights.

The rise of the novel in India was not purely a literary phenomenon. It was a social phenomenon as much, rather the fulfillment of a social need. It was associated with social, political and economic conditions which were comparable to those which favoured rise in England. The rise of novel and appearance of it in the nineteenth century India as it did in the eighteenth century England harmonized with the rise of individualism and with all the consequent political and social reorientations which followed. As observed, in Indian English novels, women writings presented Typical Indian feminine sensibility and of certain emotional aesthetic propensities and predilections which are shared by all Indian women writers writing in English till today. Feminism has grown from Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Nayantara Sahgal to pave way for Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Nina Sibal, Anees Jung, Uma Vasudev, Bharati Mukherjee and others. These newer female voices have highlighted the interior landscape of the emancipated woman’s sensibility and her psychological pragmatism.
Female subjectivity is one of the most regressive elements in a social set up. The women long for love, dependency and the material and emotional comfort of fixed class identity. At the same time there is the ardent desire to be autonomous, so she is torn between the two and suffers quietly and oscillates between “motives and aspirations, independence and reliant-security, psychic and social identity”. The search for a liberated self other than the one imposed upon women by society and culture begins when the woman starts thinking and questioning the codes of conduct laid down by society, especially a patriarchal one. This thinking and questioning attitude can start right from the woman’s childhood, persist through adulthood, that is, marriage and motherhood, and become a mature understanding of one’s individuality leading to an integrated, whole personality which can be seen in the character of Geeta in the novel ‘Inside the Haveli.’

Rama Mehta’s novel ‘Inside the Haveli’ (first published in 1977) has been hailed as a classic that maintains strict authenticity to the life it portrays. The author herself was both a novelist and a leading sociologist, whose insight into the lives of women was based upon her own experiences of life in Udaipur (Rajasthan). Her novel is built upon information contained in one of her non-fiction texts “From Purdah to Modernity,” a fascinating study that reflects Mehta’s concern with women and her country’s coexisting and conflicting trends of time. The novel portrays the educated heroine’s journey towards consciousness and realization, from modernity back into the traditional world behind the veil, where the severe restrictions of etiquette and subservience dominate life leading to the consciousness of Geeta. Self-discovery that leads to liberation is a recurrent theme in the novel ‘Inside the Haveli’. Rama wonderfully shows Geeta’s preoccupation with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within: the existential predicament of Geeta in a male centered and patriarchal Haveli. Rama Mehta, in her novel, presents the image of an educated urban girl Geeta with progressive thinking who realizes herself as a cage bird in the oppressive environment of the Haveli, and how she resists liberating herself from the old traditions and converts into the image of a cherished woman of the Haveli. Geeta finds her interiority quite transformed from the spontaneous individuality of a Bombay schoolgirl raised by her indulgent and progressive parents.

In the novel, Rama Mehta strikes a balance between tradition and modernity by representing past and present which is achieved through her woman protagonist Geeta, who severed her links with modernity but remains tied to the traditions of the Haveli. Geeta is
influenced by ancient customs and traditions, but in some aspects is deep rooted to modern customs. The novel depicts not only the courageous attempts of the protagonist to emancipate herself from inherited cultural and social bonds but also her struggle to transform Haveli from prison to some semblance of expressive private space which is the measure of the women’s agency and selfhood. In the struggle for liberation, memory is often the key, both as it turns the lock which can shut and open the prison gate. The novel locates Geeta in the present and, from this point in time, recollects her past- as memory triggered of her urban life with freedom in Bombay.

The main theme of the novel concerns Geeta’s alienation from the life of the Haveli and her gradual acceptance of its mores and rules. Geeta’s first encounter in the Haveli itself reveals the fact that she has to live by its rigidly enforced codes of behaviour like veiling her face which signifies that veiling is nothing but suppression of her individuality. “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) Geeta at once realizes that as a daughter -in-law of the Haveli, she has to draw a veil not only on her face, but also on her exuberance and individuality too and also surrender to the rigorous and conventional customs of the Haveli.

Patriarchy is something inseparable from the structure of Rajput haveli’s tradition. Geeta is also conscious of the fact that her parents’ house varies from jeevan Niwas, “in her parents’ home men and women talked quite freely…….” 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) Basically havelis are male centered according to its tradition the head of the family has immense power to implement on the family members which is undeniable. While executing his power, often the head of the family overlooks the inconvenience of the family members and makes the decisions not to violate the traditional norms. “Though to her they were only names, their presence was felt everywhere in the haveli. Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the house revolved”. The freedom of choice for women is hardly expected especially in Jeevan Niwas. It seems that against the patriarchal power of domination, Geeta’s relationship with the members of her family forms a battlefield. “In the two years Geeta ……she was unable to control either her words or her feelings ………because of this her mother-in-law kept reminding her of the importance of reticence.”(33) Here, she only intends for a liberty of
her own. In the novel protagonists patriarchal in laws stand for the power. Rama Mehta wants to seize a female space by challenging the age old order the multitude bondages of tradition enforced by a male dominated society.

The Novelist deals with some aspects of patriarchal religious traditions that involve superstitions sanctify the rigid codes of conduct expected from women. In this novel, the heroine Geeta begins her re-education in the traditional behaviour of "respectable" women, when she first lifts back her sari from her face to look at the vast walls of the haveli. "No, no, you cannot do that", she is advised and the sari is pulled down over her face." (17) Mehta portrays the rigidity of the class system within constraints of purdha system, which can detach haveli women's access to other women in order to prohibit cross-class contact and friendship. PROSCRIBED, civil law. Among the Romans, a man was said to be proscribed when a reward was offered for his head; but the term was more usually applied to those who were sentenced to some punishment which carried with it the consequences of civil death. Code, 9; 49. Since contact with the rest of society is also barred, veiled women are institutionally insulated from social change. Rama shows the veil system in a satirical way "In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face". (17) It is a way of controlling women's accessibility to the outside world. Veiling is an effective way of disallowing any rebellious activism or knowledge of changing values and attitudes that can be learnt from the outside walls of the Haveli.

Geeta is able to comprehend the fact that along with physical veiling, emotions must also be hidden in the haveli. Geeta finds that the other women in the haveli though they never expressed their feelings, "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. But on the surface they showed no dissatisfaction." (87)" Geeta cannot remain silent like them, During the times of of extreme predicament, Geeta burns with fury, anger or aggravation, yet remains silent. The fact that Geeta eventually accepts the discipline of the haveli without protest (108) highlights the opportunity, within the traditional forms of seclusion. Geeta understands that, it is necessary for any women not to express her concerns or anxieties to anyone according to the traditions of the Haveli for the survival of a woman.

While the silencing and invisibility of woman in these circumstances may appear overwhelmingly negative to the feminists,
Mehta’s novel does not play upon such binary verdicts. Silence, like veiling, is ambivalent. Geeta, for example, soon discovers positive aspects of veiling: “She came to love the veil that hid her face; this allowed her to think while others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin muslin, general name for plain woven fine white cottons for domestic use. It is believed that muslins were first made at Mosul (now a city of Iraq). They were widely made in India, from where they were first imported to England in the late 17th cent. sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them.” (23). Here ‘the novelist has given due stress on the mental crisis of the protagonist and her spirit to face the situations in life.’ (Kulkarni 227)

Geeta’s eccentricity renovates communal values. Though in the beginning she is aggravated with the traditions of the Haveli and gets anger at the loss of her independence she later, to some extent, accustomed to the discipline of the haveli. The life inside the Haveli is in harmonized by a strict code of demeanor and by relationships sticks on to a fixed pattern. Any violation is resisted and considered as an arrogant deed. Geeta’s induction into this closed world of Haveli compels her to accept it as the only way of respectable living. The other noticeable fact is that men interact with the outside world, but women are supposed to linger within the closed system in order to preserve the values. It takes almost fifteen years for Geeta to adjust herself to the life of haveli. It is her mother-in-law’s love and concern that win her heart and draw her into the life of haveli. Thus we see Geeta growing into the “web of relations,” herself. Though Geeta has accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest, there are many times “She was filled with rebellion and her face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the haveli.” (88). 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 is rankled and disturbed about the “male privileges” of food, entertainment and they are also provided with the separate and more comfortable section in the haveli. Rama informs her readers about the extraordinary entertainment for men “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.” Women are not even allowed to talk to men, especially elders, which is more forceful than her submission to the traditions of the haveli. She expressed her frustration, at living within the confined, gendered space of the Haveli: “I know the men have no problems in the world of Udaipur; you are all pampered, you lead your lives, and think women are mere chattels” (53). In the beginning Geeta is with the hope that she can leave for Delhi along with
her husband where she can escape from traditional bonds of the Haveli. But as the years pass the dream of leaving Udaipur dies in her heart. She expresses her despair to her husband "But Ajay, you said we would be only be here for a short time. It is nearly three years," replied Geeta with a certain hopelessness in her voice" At the same time she feels relieved, for at last she is sure that has to be in the Haveli. It is Geeta who stimulates the inhabitants of the Haveli into a silent transformation that is provided by education and awakening. It is interesting that the changes in human environment are brought about by a woman. Geeta is not either a rebel or a radical feminist but in her own quiet way she brings about changes in the lives of young girls in the family and outside.

Geeta does not fully conform to the old customs of the Haveli, but she understands some of its values. That is why the confrontation to it is not violent. Geeta starts teaching women from all classes of society. Initially there is a lot of resistance by different complaints about the disadvantages of literacy for women especially from servant folks "Hukkum have you heard that the engagement of my brother's daughter has been broken off; who wants a girl who is already defiant?(162)" "another woman spoke 'If these girls are not careful, they will soon find their men deserting them, and then the haveli will have to give them shelter?'(162)" but their criticism does not dampen her, 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 send Sita and Ravi to school. 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 economic independence. "Binniji [has changed the lives of these girls... most of them now can read and write; they can get work" (191).

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 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 because through learning they need to depend on the havelis"(191). 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 daughter-
in-laws has brought the gift of learning to the poor”(151). The noticeable thing is that Geeta is proudly identified as ‘the Haveli’s greatest ornament “by her patriarchal in-laws. Her deeds are trusted to be worthy even by her father-in-law.” “I am proud of Binniji. Tell her to let me know if she needs any help”, said Bhagawat Singhji (158).” He also expresses his consent to send Sita to school.” “Education is 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,” he said, looking at her intently” (103).

Geeta achieves another victory when she does not agree to the proposal of engagement of her very young daughter, Vijay, with a well-bred, educated young man from another Haveli. “I won’t agree to this criminal act of deciding who Vijay will marry when she is still a child.” (206); 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) and she tells her husband that she cannot “be fooled again. I know nothing matters more than money and prestige to you all” (207). She thinks that the union with the rival Haveli through marriage is more important, to her in-laws and they do not bother about the sufferings of Vijay if she enters the Haveli as child bride. Her daughter’s marriage proposal becomes one of the situations of her resistance. She does not accept the proposal in spite of the persuasion of her in-laws, though she does rethink it towards the end of the novel. It is with determination and modesty that she tackles the problem of child marriage. In Geeta we find a harmonious blending of the positive phases of tradition and modernity. The striking thing in Geeta’s attitude is Geeta refuses the engagement of her daughter at such an early age but she agrees with mother-in-law to get Sita (servant’s daughter) since she feels Sita will be benefited through the marriage which can provide security for her. Geeta consents to the marriage because she comes to understand that for the poor it was important to abide by family customs, otherwise they would lose the family’s approval. It is Geeta who has made it possible for Sita to be married into a family with land, a well, a house and bullock. Geeta gets admiration from her mother-in-law “I am glad you did not listen to us ignorant women. We could never arrange a match like this for Sita”. Thus Geeta, the new mistress of the haveli, has transformed traditions, fought her battles, and achieved her victory at the same time accepted positive concepts of the customs and traditions.

In post-independence India, patriarchal hierarchy co-existed with a developing democratic ethos. Modern women are emerged like
Geeta they were shaped by old traditions and strengthened by the power of education they have acquired. These women by liberating themselves from the hold of male authority, they are able to control the social conditions that raises the economical and educational opportunities of women. As Sushila Singh puts it, "Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete."(6) In this novel Rama craves to provide the complete image of humanity by portraying Geeta as a humanist in action that is able to modify tradition and reorganize the social forms. She herself undergoes change and brings about a change through her action. This modern, educated woman, belonging to the upper class of society, schools the other women and is responsible for the arousal of "humanist consciousness" in both the men and women of the Haveli. Geeta finally emerges as a humanist who has opened the way for the other women to free themselves from the constrained reality of their lives. She offers the way for a positive change by means of education, protesting against child marriage and differential treatment of boys and girls. She has opened up new horizons of possibilities arousing a sense of self-worth and self-esteem in women.

At the end of the novel Geeta asserts herself as an individual by putting an end to her doubts about herself. She is able to hold her own in a household full of tradition-bound, royal, venerable, noble and well-mannered members of her family in the Haveli. It is a proof of her individuality. She breaks traditional ground whenever it is necessary. She takes complete care to delineate her presence as one shows it with bravery and confidence of rationale and accountability to be a mistress of the Haveli. She emerges as an intelligent, impressive and wholly practical woman. The novel ends neither with the victory nor the defeat but of accordance and indulgence that explores Geeta's consciousness, realization and matured psyche.

References:


