



## **Pari – A Masterpiece Servant Character Presented by Rama Mehta**

### **Authors:**

**1<sup>st</sup> Dr. Shivani R. Upadhyay**

Assistant Professor of English

Lukhdhirji Engineering College, Morbi, Gujarat, India

**2<sup>nd</sup> Dr. Himanshu A. Srivastava**

Assistant Professor of English

Government Engineering College Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India

### **Abstract:**

Normally, the servant-characters are anonymous and occupy very little space in literature. They are usually the silent characters. But Rama Mehta, in *Inside the Haveli*, portrays a host of maid servants having their own identity and individuality. They are given sufficient space and freedom. Pari occupies almost equal space as that of her mistress in the novel. Pari becomes an integral part of the family, haveli and narrative. She carries out the responsibility of making the daughter-in-law of the haveli familiar with the tradition. She plays a major role in shaping the personalities and relationships of the masters and maids. She, with her maturity, wisdom and experience, affects the point of view of the people around her. She is sensitive and sensible. Her qualities and conduct commands respect.

**Key Words:** Servant, Role, Relationship, Power, Status

Generally, the servant-characters are functional in a literary work. They normally live with their employers and work hard to keep the house running. They serve the purpose of 'chorus'. They are almost faceless and occupy very little space on the pages. They are not significant, and therefore, ignored by the authors. Sometimes they are introduced without any proper name and any particular

purpose. They are never expected to express their opinions, share their feelings, reveal their thoughts and give advice. They are usually the mute characters.

Breaking the tradition, Rama Mehta has portrayed a galaxy of servant characters in her only novel *Inside the Haveli*. Servants are ubiquitous in her novel. Anastasiia writes: "Domestic servants in the medieval era were vital for the functioning of households. They played a crucial role in the daily lives of their employees, ensuring that homes ran smoothly and efficiently. These servants enabled their employers to focus on their work or study without worrying about the household's daily chores." The same is true for the servants of the haveli. They are not mere functionaries; they are an integral part of the haveli.

Rama Mehta's uniqueness lies in her wonderful depiction of a host of maid servants. Few Indian English novelists have given such a vivid account of the maid servants. These servants have their own identity and individuality. They are given sufficient space and freedom to express their mind and heart. We have self-sacrificing and authoritative Pari; extremely devoted Bhatiyani; frank and talkative Dhapu; defiant and thankless Lakshmi; practical and dutiful midwife Sarju; caring and submissive Ganga and Champa and meek and timid Sita. As Natalie Walshe observes: "The servants are an integral part of the framework. Without them, these stories would be a lot thinner. Once we begin to notice them, they become increasingly visible, their value increasingly apparent, and their importance impossible to ignore."

Pari is the head servant of the haveli. She came to the haveli as a teenager. She was trained by Bhabha Sa. She faced very hard time under the patronage of Bhabha Sa. No thought of any concession or liberty could touch her as Bhabha Sa was an iron lady whose word was a law. Pari remembers, "I was too busy to think of things like happiness... Besides I do not even know what the word means." (24) The experience was undoubtedly very tough but the shaping quality of it is greatly valued by Pari.

After the marriage of Kanwarani Sa, Pari becomes her personal maid and also the senior maid. Prabhat Kumar writes, "The senior maid is an elderly woman. She is the personal attendant of the mistress, thus symbolizing not only her seniority in age but also a greater access to the physical and emotional world of

the mistress in comparison to other maids.” (187) Here, Pari devotes her life to the service of the haveli. She would easily neglect her personal engagements for the sake of the haveli and the mistress. She cannot afford to hurt the mistress or make her angry. “...her deep loyalty to the haveli always came to the surface when anyone was critical of her mistress.” (191)

Pari is the first person to introduce Geeta to Udaipur, to the haveli traditions, to purdah. She initiates Geeta in the process of 'socialization' after marriage. She has already known four generations of the family. She knows the traditions and rituals to be followed. “...The new daughters-in-law looked to her for guidance and followed her instructions... They knew that she had to be given the same respect a one paid to a relative. She was a maid only in name and she never tried to be anything more. But the other servants knew her position and treated her with deference. They took her orders as if they were those of the mistress.” (9-10) Pari is given equal importance and respect as that of Kanwarani Sa by the author. Her experience and devotion are valued. Young haveli brides including Geeta touch her feet to seek her blessings. They reciprocate with endearing compliance.

Pari becomes an integral part of the family, haveli and narrative. “What defines dāi’s character is her unique relation to the sarkar and her extra-monetary service as affective caretaker of a (Hindu) family’s values and culture. In other words, the figure of baḍī dāi shares and supplements the duties and responsibilities of the ideal wife-woman of the household.” (Prabhat Kumar 195) Though a maid, Pari can and does scold Geeta for talking too much, for visiting the male-courtyard, for not observing purdah properly or for not displaying sufficient subservience. Geeta, for survival within the haveli culture, must heed Pari’s instructions. The highborn maiden must turn to the empirical insights of the lowborn Pari.

Anastasiia observes, “They (servants) had close relationships with their employers and often worked for their entire lives in the same household. They were also trusted advisors and confidants of their employers.” Pari takes the unassigned responsibility of making Geeta (an 'outsider') insider. Like a mother-in-law, she instructs Geeta about the ways of behaviour according to the haveli

tradition. She says, "Do not look so confused... You will have to make your reputation as a good devoted daughter-in-law." (18) Geeta is struck by the real power behind the show of powerlessness. The author comments: "Pari always made her (Geeta) feel inadequate. There was a kind of authority and self confidence in her that made Geeta uncomfortable." (26)

Pari is taken aback hearing Geeta's proposal for Sita's schooling. She sternly opposes Geeta and asks her to leave Sita to the maids. She reminds her occasionally that Sita is only a servant's child without a mother to care of her. So, Sita must not be spoiled. She must learn to obey the old maids. After having a hot discussion on the issue of Sita's schooling, Pari quickly attains her usual poise. When she sees Geeta ready to visit her mother-in-law, Pari blesses her. There is no rancour in her voice and no change of expression in her kind eyes.

With the passage of time, she accepts new ideas and praises Geeta for her radical step of sending Sita to school. When Kanwarani Sa blames Geeta for neglecting household affairs, she (Pari) prevents her to do so. She is grateful to Geeta as they find a very good match for Sita due to her education.

As Dave Astor observes, "Servants in literature also help us judge their masters. You can tell a lot about an affluent person's decency (or lack of) by how they treat their so-called "inferiors"." Geeta starts classes for the servants' children and women. People are critical about Geeta. But Pari approves the classes. Her face shines with a warm glow. She speaks with deep emotion, almost with reverence, "She (Geeta) spends hours and hours with these poor children. Who else would do this for them?" (158) When there is great commotion about the classes in the Udaipur havelis, Pari says, "Whatever anyone may say, Binniji has changed the lives of these girls." (191)

Status is just as important in the servant hierarchy as it is in the aristocratic ranks. "The duties of each servant were not only defined by their specific role but also by their rank within the household. Higher-ranking servants had more privileges and responsibilities than those lower down the ladder." (Anastasiia) As a head servant, Pari works as a connecting link between the masters and the servants. She let them know the wishes, demands or grievances of the servants. The master depends on Pari to keep him informed about his obligations to the other havelis. Pari's opinions are important for both the master and the mistress.

The master says regarding the issue of Sita's schooling, "I am glad you are satisfied, Pariji, I was really afraid of you when I decided to send Sita to school." (158) The other servants know her position in the haveli. Dhapu says, "Once Pariji had made up her mind, I knew she would persuade even the master." (27) Everyone believes in her sense of justice.

Pari's conventional mind is revealed in her comments and, in turn, presents the picture of contemporary society. When Sita is born Pari comments, "The poor girl (Lakshmi) must already be worrying about the dowry." (9) In support of the old hierarchy, Pari says, "...everyone thinks he is equal; how is that possible?" (21) Pari's presence of mind is excellent. None and nothing can go unnoticed. She can master her agitation in a moment's time and tackles the situation without hesitation. She is always ready with answers. The author comments, "Pari was the general peace-maker when everyone around was screaming. She hardly ever lost her temper." (155)

Pari gives respect and commands the same. Prabhat Kumar writes about the head servant: "Despite being a servant, on the basis of her loyalty, honesty, integrity and devotion to the values and wellbeing of the household, baḍī dāi earns and carves out a unique position for herself. At the cost of losing her individuality (her own family is of no relevance in the story), she is elevated to a higher status; she is like a member of her master's family. So, she is superior in hierarchy of servants, ... Rather, she lives to care for her master's family. (193) Pari enjoys the same status in the haveli.

But she knows her limits and never tries to cross them. "It was not for her to interfere when family members talked." (103) Prabhat Kumar observes, "However, her (the head servant's) authority is always mediated and carries the mark of her identity as servant. Although she advises and instructs the young maiden and bride, with the larger aim of maintaining the ethos of the household, and is duly respected by them as a senior woman of the family, in critical moments the dāi never fails to drop a reminder that she is after all their launḍī or dāsī." (194)

When Geeta puts forth the proposal for Sita's schooling before her father-in-law, Pari keeps silence. She does not try to overpower the masters.

Pari is clever enough to make out the intentions of the haveli women. These women object the education of the young women. Forgetting the complexes she earlier had for the castes and races, she bluntly opines, "It's only the poor that they prevent from coming (to the classes)." (191)

Pari is a motherly figure. She is caring and loving. She considers herself, rather her negligence, responsible for Lakshmi's escape. She blames herself for not knowing that something is weighing heavily on her heart.

Pari is, like an average Indian, fatalist. She is a widow. She does not get any kind of support from her in-laws. Yet she gives each penny she earns to them. Marriage, for an Indian woman, is a bond which exists beyond the death of her husband. She says, "We all have to accept fate. There is no escape from that." (12) She admires Geeta's efforts to educate the lowborn in order to enable them to survive outside the haveli. But she heartily believes "... no matter what she does for us, we and our children will remain servants. No one but God can change one's destiny." (128)

Her growing age does not make any difference: her voice remains firm and authority unchallenged. While serving meals to the master, she says, "Binniji, you rest a little. As long as I have strength you do not have to worry." (99) But when the cook accuses the maids of sitting idly and gossiping, Pari bluntly replies, "If I were twenty years younger, you could accuse me of not helping you, but now I am too old." (155)

Pari is very calculative and practical. She asks Khyali to arrange sugar, wheat and oil for Sita's marriage in advance. "Last minute arrangements cost more." (213) She tries to manage things properly and inexpensively. She tries to economize the expenses. She is aware of the religious and social conventions which must be followed during the marriage ceremony. Therefore, she asks Khyali to call Dhapu's husband. "Gangaram without Lakshmi can't preside over the marriage ceremony." (213) Dhapu and her husband are supposed to do the job.

Pari is a sensitive woman. When the mistress comments about the preparations of Sita's marriage, Pari feels bad. She thinks, "Before making her remark, she (Kanwarani Sa) should have known that the servants too had feelings that could be bruised." (224) She is also a shrewd observer of human behaviour.

Like Kanwarani Sa, she is deeply affectionate but undemonstrative. She is the repository of traditional wisdom which makes for success within the format of ancient Rajput homes. Such 'knowledge' is experiential garnered from combining personal ability and external circumstances.

The author gives a memorable character sketch of Pari, such that would be hard to find elsewhere in Indian English fiction because servants are usually faceless providers of creature comforts. She writes about Pari with a rare understanding of a low born woman's 'uneducated' but strong imperatives. Pari's character is a dynamic one. She changes with the passage of time. She displays rare modernity by suggesting a grand celebration for the birth of the first granddaughter of the haveli, Vijay.

As Prabhat Kumar observes about *badi dai* in the Hindi literature, "Dāi effectively belongs to the same home as the sarkar; her individual identity as a household woman, wife and mother is irrelevant. Her moral integrity and loyalty to the household are unwavering. She puts herself at risk for the greater family good. She is articulate and upright, yet conforms to the code of social hierarchy (master/mistress–servant relationship). These qualities make her the moral axis of the family." (195) The literature beautifully reflects contemporary social life. Pari is one such character found in the then society and the author has portrayed a realistic pen picture of her in the novel. The author has given due importance to the head servant and paid great tribute to the servant community.

Anastasiia writes, "While the portrayal of servants in literature often reinforced their subservient status, they also provided a window into their experiences and perspectives. Through their actions and dialogue, authors were able to explore themes such as social mobility, loyalty, and agency." Applying the same technique, Rama Mehta has introduced her value-orientation through the character Pari. She has revealed her own belief in traditions and her inclination towards modernity blended in Pari's point of view.

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