

## Domestic Violence and Dowry Deaths in India: A Voice of Resistance in Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*

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### Abstract

*Protest is one of the most powerful and effective tools of expression in literature. In the context of our socio-economic scenario, many women dramatists have delineated in their writings the barbarities, cruelties and crimes perpetrated against women in the name of culture and tradition governed by a patriarchal society. Dina Mehta is one of the gifted Indian writers in English who raises her voice in protest against a number of atrocities against women such as dowry, female foeticide, gender inequality, illiteracy, poverty, legal biasness and overall subjugation of women. This paper is an attempt to study the present tragic spectacles of dowry victim women in Indian society and the voice of dissent regarding it by Dina Mehta in her play *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1993). She dramatizes actual happenings in life to highlight this social issues. Her Play creates awareness on the rising crimes against women in male hegemony and urges all to raise consciousness on the women empowerment and social justice.*

**Keywords:** Dowry, Gender inequality, Injustice, Subjugation, Legal biasness, Protest, Women empowerment.

In Indian marriage traditions, the practice of dowry is a rampant convention from ancient Vedic era to the present. This malpractice is widely found throughout India irrespective of caste

and creed. Dowry is generally known as a relocation of property from the bride's family to that of the bridegroom at the time of marriage. This practice continues even after marriage. Failure to fulfil and comply to the demands later results in a horrifying situation where one is forced to lead a life of compromise under trauma and torture with silence which usually leads to killing of the bride in a planned manner and sometimes compelling the brides to lose their mental sanity, leading them towards an unfortunate death in the form of suicide or making situations for the brides where they immolate themselves to save their parents who fails to meet the demand of their in-laws but still the latter do not get contended. In the context of Indian Socio-economical environment, the occurrence of 'bride burning' as well as 'dowry death' is an inhuman brutality which has made the situation of Indian womanhood in to a dangerous situation. So the maxim is all correct that the marriages are made in Heaven but are decided on Earth.

A message of resistance must be conveyed in various ways against these social evils. Among them theatre has an unparalleled advantage because it can directly communicate to the audience or spectators. It's the live experience that creates the difference in theatre. Drama is one of the most powerful and effective mediums to raise voice against these evils. When dramatists witness a situation which they cannot bear with, they protest and this finds expression in their works. So the plays provide a means to record the dissent. With the advent of feminism in the 1970s, women got a wide range of opportunities to articulate their voice candidly. It provided women playwrights with a space for self exploration where they promised to uphold the concerns of women. Many women dramatists condemn in their drama the brutality and offense against womenfolk in the name of custom and cultural heritage. Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, Uma Parameswaran, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mahasweta Devi are some of the foremost exponents of the movement known as 'Theatre of Protest' who, with the aim to reach to a broader audience, chose English as the medium to vociferate the real condition of the female folk. They expressed their anger against the exploitation on the basis of gender discrimination.

Dina Mehta is a gifted Indian writer who writes in English. She has authored two novels *And Some Take a Lover* (1992) and *Mila in Love* (2003) and two short story anthologies *The Other Woman and Other Stories* published in 1981 and *Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic and Other Stories* in 1994 and quite a few award-winning plays like *Brides Are Not for Burning*,

*The Myth Makers* published in 1969, *Tiger Tiger* in 1978, *Getting Away With Murder* in 1989, and *A Sister Like You* published in 1996. In all these plays, she stages authentic incidents and happenings of life to bring them to the consideration for the public opinion. Some grave social issues like the evil of dowry system, abuse of child, female foeticide, rape, suppression of women, and so on so forth. Among many other things, theatre most importantly proposed the idea of a woman's language and its possibilities of creating altogether a new kind of narrative in theatre. Dina Mehta states, "The woman dramatist can see more clearly into the female psyche than the male, and this is reflected in her plays...(Appendix 1). *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a drama which presents a Problem play, similar to the plays portrayed in the works of George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and John Osborne which talks about the contemporary problem, domestic violence and in a way which creates awareness on the sensitiveness of the social issues and its handling. Miss Mehta showcase and probes into the functioning of the existing law and order which provides an escape and exemption to the offenders with its intriguing and strategic moves, the slowness of government which only works and decides ones fate on the basis of proof, and further the play also hovers on the problems of unemployment and poverty.

The continuation of the prevalent dowry system still found in literately texts has to do with present religious, economical and socio-cultural factors of the society. In Indian dramaturgy, as the title of Dina Mehta's play *Brides Are Not for Burning* suggests, is a dramatic production of the brutality and aggression against the women by the protectors of the civilized society. It is a documentation of one of the major evils of our society which is death due to dowry and its dreadful results. Mehta highlights the clear situation of our society where women are treated as a bag of dowry. This play is an obvious suggestion to the spectators about the multi layer problems that women face in the society. The readers and spectators can view all these social malevolence through the minute telescopic scrutiny of Mehta's spokesperson Malini Desai otherwise known as Malu, who is represented as the 'angry young woman' of the play. All through the play, she tries to find out the 'secret' behind the demise of her sister Lakshmi which partly opens the intricacies of socio-cultural policy accountable for this tragedy. The patriarchal cultural prohibitions compel daughters to sacrifice themselves at the altar of greed.

The play centers around a Gujarati family of lower middle class and it unravels not only the story of that particular family but also acts as a prologue to a significant broader narrative lying beyond the confined spaces of the Desai's dwelling room, Vinod's workplace, Tarla's kitchen, Sanjay's living room, Roy's residence place and Laxmi in-laws' living cum dining room. The plot of the play revolves round in the form of the neurotic and irresistible suicide of Laxmi, later on her in-laws presented it as an accident. It has also been corroborated by the probing agency. Malini is the sister of the victim, Laxmi. She tries heartily to expose the real fact behind her sister's suicidal death. But in doing so, she neither gets the help of her own family members, particularly, her brother Anil nor from anybody else from the community which is made of Tarla, Laxmi's friend, and Sanjay, Malini's boyfriend.

The issue of dowry brings into probe the failure of law and justice. Dina Mehta's play *Brides are not for Burning* begins with the conversation between Malini and her father. Malini suspects her sister Laxmi's death to be a case of bride burning. Laxmi's marriage was an extravagant one. Laxmi's father mentions:

Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2,000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of silk... Their expectations were endless because they imagined a government clerk makes so much on the side. They thought I had feathered my nest with bribes and kickbacks... And I let them think that because I wanted to do my best for Laxmi.  
(13)

Laxmi is oppressed by both, parents and her in-laws. She was forced to leave her studies at a tender age and was not properly educated "because with mother always pregnant and ailing, she had to baby-sit for...!" (17) her younger siblings. In her in-laws house Laxmi was tortured for not bringing enough dowry and she was an 'object' rather than a 'subject'. Marfatia family never demanded dowry directly but "they tormented and humiliated her because the dowry she brought them was not what they had angled for" (16). She is accused of infertility whereas the truth was Vinod, her husband, in spite of trying so many treatments could not cure his infertility. But this fact was suppressed from public eye. Her in-laws have insured Laxmi's life for a sum of Rs.80000/-, by foreseeing the future, where even if something unnatural happens to her they can make profit from that. She is the victim of the brutal dowry system. She could lead a contented

life in her husband's house if she had possessed a solid bank balance to boost her up. Malini precisely tells Anil: "... Freedom is money in the bank, Anil. You think if Laxmi had a fat bank account they could have trampled over her? Never" (21).

Malini, the spokesperson of Mehta, is not passive like Laxmi. She is a rebel who challenges the system. She represents the 'angry young woman' who desires a resolution, a way out for the troubles of the world. Malini is presented as embodiment of protest. She considers that action can be justifiably done through violence and the idealism of her brother Anil is futile. She protests against the issue of subordination of woman. The judgment of the judiciary regarding her sister's demise as an accident makes Malini mock the verdict: "They decided Laxmi's sari was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident" (Mehta 15). She is frustrated with the inaction of government in her sister's case. She tells Anil: "I've come to the conclusion that the weakness of democracies is that they move too slowly in the right direction" (21). She was once infatuated of pursuing a career in law but after this incident of her sister's death, she gave up the idea of having law as a profession and instead turns to the path of revolution. She denounces the judiciary and remarks: "I spit on your law courts! Playthings in the hands of the exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor" (Mehta 18). She is determined to procure punishment to Laxmi's husband and in-laws. She seeks justice for her sister's murder.

Fighting for justice, Malini wages a war against the prevailing social order that condones the crime. The play foregrounds the response of the society to the grave concern of bride-burning due to lack of action and apathy. It results in percolating the evil into the subcutaneous stratum of the society out of its severe indifference. Malini, the grief-stricken and heartbroken sister of Laxmi, gives an endeavor to get justice to the departed soul but she was hurt by the indifferent response of Anil and some others which made it obvious how the society would like to put on the apparel of reticence after such cruel act of bride-burning was committed. This has been candidly expressed by Anil:

"Come on Malu. She is gone now. Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress.  
Malini: But not beyond retribution" (Mehta 18)

She sets off alone on the path she thinks right. Roy says: “the law is only for those who can hire it to serve them-can you deny that?... He says even protection in uniform has its price-go and ask a Harijan. How many cases of arson against them have reached the courts? I demand justice! That was my sister they set fire to” (Mehta 19).

Furthermore, Sanjay, her boyfriend also demoralizes her by telling not to speak against the incident of her elder sister. Sanjay told, “I told you, these things are best forgotten. Be reasonable, Malu”. (Mehta 51) Malini and Sanjay’s relationship naturally holds the expectation that the girl will get married to a person she intensely loves. Sanjay without wasting much time informs Malini about the wish of his elderly father’s decision to find a suitable counterpart for him and also announces his choice as a dutiful and submissive son. Malini has hardly any idea how to face this disenchantment. This is not an aberrated situation in our societal set up. The darling has to endure a lot after she surrenders herself to a man whom she loves.

Malini recognizes that her lover Sanjay is a hypocrite and also turns down the offer of the revolutionary leader, Roy. She is annoyed with the media too. This is explicit from her comment: “Of course there is no report of it in the papers. We are not important enough”.(11) She succeeds in bringing out the naked truth of her sister’s murder, but fails to bring justice to her as she is not supported by anyone in her venture. The dissatisfaction of the common man regarding the judicial system is also exposed in the play. She becomes very angry when she realizes that law also has given dictum of Laxmi’s death as a mere accident. Malini in anticipation of a more fulfilling future says: “...one road still beckons: I will educate myself all I can. There is no future that can be denied me” (94).

Towards the end of the play Anil supports Malini in her pursuit to unearth the murkiness that lies behind Laxmi’s death. He mentions: “Yes, a new inquest will certainly bring out new flaws, little breaches of the law that were overlooked, little erosion of truth” (62). In this drama Anil plays a pivotal role of male voice against dowry. Though at the outset of the play, he is quite inactive, but finally he delivers the tag line of the play: “That brides are not for burning! Not as a ritual sacrifice on the altar of avarice and greed” (63). Dina Mehta appeals through Malini to give up passive resistance and not to promote social injustice.

It is Dina Mehta's obligation to the cause of women emancipation and empowerment that insisted her to voice dissent against the patriarchal behavior dealt out to women. Her chosen characters like Malini, Sonali, Mallika and Dr. Raziya are the empowered women who resist being typed into the stereotypical figure of woman. They choose not to be submissive to the demands of the society and take control of their life into their own hands. They realize that they have to confront not only their strengths but also their weaknesses. It signifies their empowerment. Swami Vivekananda once said "arise awake and stop not until the goal is reached". The creative minds are doing their best, through their works, for the emancipation of women from the fetters of patriarchal hegemony and it is our obligation now to help to the cause of the womenfolk optimistically for the betterment of the world.

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