



## **EXHIBITING RESISTANCE: IN DINA MEHTA'S PLAYS BRIDES ARE NOT FOR BURNING AND GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER**

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### **Abstract:**

*Theatre is a medium where playwrights express their voice. The protest that they have to register finds influence in the drama. Dina Mehta in her plays 'Brides are not for burning' and 'Getting Away with Murder' focuses on women issues. This paper attempts to explore the resistance upheld by the playwright through her plays against the age old beliefs and tradition prevailing in the Indian Society.*

**Key words:** Theatre, Protest, Women issues, Bride Burning & Resistance

### **Exhibiting Resistance: In Dina Mehta's Plays Brides are Not for Burning and Getting Away with Murder:**

A message can be conveyed in various ways. One can either speak it out or can pass it on with gestures. But, for both one needs a listener. In various art forms too, message is conveyed to the audience but among those theatre has an unparalleled advantage – it can directly communicate to the audience. It's the live experience that creates the difference in theatre. Protest finds most powerful and effective expression in drama. When dramatists witness a situation which they cannot tolerate, they protest and this finds expression in their work. Thus the play serves as a dramatist's means to register their protest. For decades theatre was men's domain, where they themselves enacted the female roles. But with the new advent of feminism in the 1970s, women got a wide range of opportunities to articulate their voice. 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 plays the crime against women in the name of tradition and culture.

Gradually in the Indian context too women playwrights came into existence. Even though there were women actors and playwrights, they were hesitant to come to the mainstream because of the Indian culture. Primarily, Indian women dramatists encountered the problem of English Language intelligibility among the Indian audience. 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.

Indians follow tradition and customs to a large extent. Indian parents believe that daughters are to be married off at the earliest. A woman in Indian family is always submissive, as she is trained from her childhood to surrender to the needs of the family. As a result she never reacts to the atrocities done to her. All the matters concerning woman is decided by her relatives or the society.

“Who to wed? Whom to revere?  
Couldn't comprehend the male fear  
Why to bow? How to conduct?  
At each corner, obstacles erupt.  
How to write? When to procreate?  
What for the world is most appropriate?  
I ask and get no replies .....  
Moments come, Century flies  
But the quest of female never dies!”

(Monika Choudhry, 3)

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). Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parameswaran, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, and Manjula Padmanabhan are some of the leading names of the 'Theatre of Protest' movement who, for a wider reach wrote in English to project the situation of the woman. They expressed their anger against the exploitation on the basis of gender discrimination. Dina Mehta is a talented Indian writer in English who has to her credit two novels (And Some Take a Lover (1992) and Mila in Love (2003)), two books of short stories (The Other Woman and Other Stories (1981) and Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic and Other Stories (1994)) and several prize-winning plays like Brides Are Not for Burning, The Myth Makers (1969), Tiger Tiger (1978), Getting Away With Murder (1989), and A Sister Like You (1996). In her plays, she stages real life incidents to bring to the limelight some social issues such as the evil of dowry, female foeticide, child abuse, rape, subjugation of women, and so on.

The issue of dowry brings into probe the failure of law and justice. The play "Brides are not for Burning" by Dina Mehta 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 should have led a happy life in her husband's house had she had a sound bank balance to back her. Malini rightly 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 is the 'angry young woman' who wants solutions for the problems of the world. Malini is presented as embodiment of protest. She believes that violence is action and that her brother Anil's idealism is ineffective. She protests against the subordination of woman. The judiciary's verdict of her sister's death 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" (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" (18). She is determined to procure punishment to Laxmi's husband and in-laws. She seeks justice for her sister's murder.

In fighting for justice, Malini confronts the society that tolerates the crime. She doesn't get support even from her brother Anil. This is evident from his comments:

"Come on Malu. She is gone now. Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress.

Malini: But not beyond retribution" (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" (19).

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 common man's dissatisfaction with the legal system is also exposed in the play, through Malini. She loses her temper when she comes to know that law too has proved Laxmi's death as an 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 quest to unravel the mystery 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 the play, beside Malini, Anil achieves the credit who plays the role of male promotion against dowry. Though initially he is passive, but finally he utter the bottom 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.

'Getting Away with Murder' is a play which explores the many dimensions and experiences of women's lives. The play portrays the lives of three friends who are dealing with evils like childhood sexual abuse, discrimination and infidelity. "Each character reveals a secret sorrow and the most shocking revelation of all is the trauma of child abuse within families which is never exposed." (Monika Choudary, 15) In the Indian patriarchal society, a woman is considered as a burden and a liability. Mallika is a woman of determination. She is successful woman and also wards off the advances of her male partner who tells her that woman should stick to either secretarial work or the maximum to PR work. She even rescues Thelma, her secretary, from the tricks of her partner.

Sonali, the next main lead of the play is a victim of childhood sexual abuse this had led to psychosis in her. She is constantly haunted by a fear that "someone indoors is watching me" (BB, 58). Sonali was the victim of childhood sexuality. She committed female feticides because of the fear of giving birth to a girl who would have to lead a life of "violence and servitude" (BB, 63). She confides to Mallika that if a woman cannot bear a son it's because of the "retribution for the misdeeds in her past life?" (BB, 63) and she wants an amniocentesis done. Mallika gets annoyed and says "I thought only ignorant women had this prejudice or depraved women with drudgery as their lot, who are sucked into further poverty and debts when they spawn daughters because girls need

dowries... But to someone like you, how can it matter if the first child is a boy or girl?"(BB, 62). Sonali envisions a different future, though she says: "Nothing can change overnight, I guess, but we can be goddesses if we want it enough..."(BB, 92). There is a note of insight in this comment where she visualizes a bright future. At the end of the play she is empowered, where she is able to speak and overcome her fear.

Dr. Raziya is the third woman in the play. She is in an insecure relationship. Her husband Habib, under his mother's pressure, wants to get married to a nineteen year old girl as Raziya "...can't give him children" (BB, 77). Even though Raziya decides not to react, she is empowered when she declares that: "... don't fool yourself that you and I are so different Malu! Or that by identifying man as villain we have won our fight for equality! The enemy is within, don't you see? It's in our minds, Mallika that we are underlings!"(BB, 78)

Indian English playwrights used the theatre as a tool to voice their concerns towards the gender discrimination and also tried to record resistance against malpractices and misdemeanor which was not discussed or splendidly mislaid by the mainstream Indian playwrights. They adopted theatre as a practical means to register their resistance and instigate a revolution by framing their own critical canons. They have become more vocal and are aware of their rights. Dr. Shuchi Sharma maintains:

Not just altering but also redefining theatrical norms and structures, these playwrights seek to convert the theatre into Brechtian metaspace where art, artist and spectator coalesce to initiate the process of social change. Merging aesthetic imagination with social process their plays choose to question and interrogate those very paradigms which have hitherto remained male preserve under patriarchal hegemony. (5)

### **Conclusion:**

It is Dina Mehta's commitment to the cause of female empowerment that has made her protest against the patriarchal treatment meted out to women. Her chosen characters like Malini, Sonali, Mallika and Dr. Raziya are the empowered women who resist being type casted into the stereotypical image 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 away 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 shackles of patriarchal society and now it's the turn of the common people to contribute positively for the cause.

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