

## **A Study of multiple Violence and the voice of protest in Dina Mehta's plays *Getting Away with Murder and Brides Are Not for Burning***

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### **Abstract**

Scripting violence by the women playwrights can be considered as an active reaction by them against the violence experienced by women. Female playwrights seem to voice the condition of almost all sections of women in Indian society who undergo different acts of violence. It is a significant initiative taken by them to create a new canon of theatre which includes plays on women by women. And this effort was particularly fuelled by the feminist enterprise that emerged as a visible political phenomenon from the middle of the twentieth century. In the context of Indian theatre also, this act scripting woman conscious plays by women about women's lives could be considered as a part of the feminist writing project as it seems to pose a challenge to the mainstream theatre and its stereotypical representation of women. The present paper in the light of Dina Mehta's two texts will try to show feminine psyche, multiple tortures upon women, traumatic impact and their voice of protest.

**Key words:** Violence, Theatre, Oppression, Feminism, Patriarchy, Protest

The re-discovery of women's theatre history in the West in 1980s was one of the influential factors which inspired the women playwrights to write women's theatre or woman conscious plays. This re-discovery finds a resonance in the Indian theatrical tradition also. There was a Simultaneous emergence of women's theatre in India through playwrights like Mahasweta Devi, Shanta Gokhale, Usha Ganguli, Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan etc. Predictably these plays are also woman conscious plays. These playwrights have started writing plays (both in English and regional languages) representing the issues concerning women, and also voicing their own resistance to social pressures imposed on them in the literary field.

Dina Mehta is a Mumbai based playwright who has also scripted plays in English like Manjula Padmanabhan. *Brides Are Not for Burning*, *The Myth-makers*, *Sister Like You* and *Getting Away with Murder* are some of her important contributions to the world of contemporary Indian drama. Out of these I have taken two plays namely *Getting Away with Murder* and *Brides Are Not for Burning*. *The first one* deals with the story of Sonali who is a victim of child sexual abuse, and the after-effects of this violence on her adult life. Centering on Sonali's story, the play also represents the painful experiences of a couple of other young women who include Mallika, Raziya and Thelma. They all are victims of gender specific

violence against women in some ways or the other. *Getting Away with Murder* resonates with both covert and overt forms of violence that affect women's public and private lives. The sufferings of the three friends Sonali, Mallika (also known as Malu) and Raziya may be termed as "self-imposed" as all of them, despite being well educated and having a modern outlook, are actually unable to free themselves from the traditional constraints. The happenings in the play show that the problem basically lies in the mind-set of women who practically fail to welcome positive changes. The traditional patriarchal norms are so ingrained in their mind that they conform to the boundaries created by the embedded tradition.

The chief protagonist Sonali in *Getting Away with Murder* is sexually abused by her uncle Narotam at age eight, which is directly revealed by Gopal towards the end of the play:

Gopal: I guess there is no...less brutal way of saying that my sister was sexually abused...from the time she was 8 years old. So you can imagine ...night after night coming to her bed...He.. .threatened her into silence.. .and submission...the screams swallowed must still be tearing her up inside...And I did nothing to help her, nothing. (2000: 87-88)

Gopal's speech exposes the trauma of sexual violence that makes Sonali's life a living hell. Instead of providing scope for direct on-stage representation of this violence, Mehta represents it through the words of Gopal who is an eye-witness. The playwright seems to be aware of the negative impact of direct visual representation of such violent acts on stage. Hence, there is no scope for visual representation of violence in the play.

The first half of the play portrays the strange behaviour exhibited by Sonali which is nothing but the direct outcome of her abused past. The past experience of violence affects her present. Her acute headache, hysterical reactions, and her hidden/unspecified anger at things resemble the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. In Sonali's case this disorder seems to be caused by her experience of childhood sexual abuse.

This unusual behaviour on Sonali's part - throwing of the coffee things crashing to the floor in the restaurant (while revealing her thoughts before Malu) may be seen as a visual sign on stage suggesting her unstable mental condition. The unexpected sound of crashing produced thus may supplement the feeling of shock and suspense in the reader's/audience's consciousness.

The most stunning revelation of Sonali's plight comes in Act I, scene (iii). The entire scene is devoted to the description of Sonali's present traumatic condition caused by her past experience of abuse. Mehta not only describes her condition in words, but also adds gestures and other bodily movements to her character - all these when enacted on stage can effectively portray the after-effects of that violence on her. On stage, Sonali may be presented not only as a semiotic content but also as a visual image to be perceived along with her strange physical behaviours and neurosis. The performance possibilities of her dialogue are also equally significant. If directed with a conscious awareness of the problem of child sexual abuse, the words are capable of creating a striking impact on the audience's mind.

Sonali is not only a victim of childhood sexual abuse; she is also neglected by her mother for being a girl. Indulging in the traditional negligence relating to the birth of a female child and the preference given to a boy child, Sonali's mother neglects her and cares only for Gopal. As Sonali says: "My mother never loved me. She had eyes only for Gopal...and for him" (2000: 86). Neglect/indifference shown towards Sonali is not violence overtly; but it can be considered as an act of psychological violence which is less spectacular but more effective. The traditional mindset of Sonali's mother is the outcome of her being part of the gendered society; a society that views women or (a girl child) as passive beings, only required for the purpose of fulfilling men's sexual needs. Sonali's dialogues in this respect are significant when she says:

"...Mother told me that just as a scorpion enjoys stinging people with all the pent-up venom in its tail, lordly men desire to sting their women - and a good wife always lets her husband to do so..."(2000: 86). Her speech reveals how women are socialised into normative roles of subordination and subjugation and how this process continues via women themselves. Later Sonali's mother is successful in sowing the seeds of the same traditional mindset in Sonali who subsequently goes to the extent of killing her female foetus. This is an example of violence against women inherent in the tradition. These stereotypical/traditional notions about women are nothing but patriarchal constructs which are being carried on for generations after generations.

The old saying that violence begets violence is noticeable in *Getting Away with Murder*. Physical, psychological and sexual violence against women leave deep scars on its victims. The victims suffer from depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress syndrome and food disorders; the list is endless. They also are seen attempting suicide, taking drugs and exhibiting various signs of somatic and psychosomatic disorders; making them vulnerable to further violence. This is very much relevant in Sonali's case, who suffers not only violence but also indulges in further. Another form of violence against women is female foeticide. It is predominant in many Asian countries including India. The practice of female foeticide is common not only among the poor uneducated families, but also among the rich, educated and middle class families in India. Foeticide is the product of the "traditional" notion of women as burdensome beings. Besides, the prevalence of dowry system also promotes female infanticide and foeticide; modern technology and medical science also aid and abet the rise of such forms of violence against women by inventing methods of sex-selection. Female foeticide results in the growth of unbalanced sex ratio, leading to the scarcity of the girl child. Since the 1980s, India has witnessed a sharp decline in juvenile sex ratio; this decline of female population in India is indeed striking violent acts as the perpetrator.

Raziya, unlike Sonali is not a victim of sexual abuse. The violence that Raziya undergoes is more subtle. The marriage between Raziya and Habib is the result of their mutual love. But Raziya fails to give birth to a baby, and so her mother-in-law insists that Habib should marry another woman. Raziya accepts her condition as the lot of a "barren woman" and encourages Habib to get married to Zameena. A doctor by profession, Raziya goes through all the required medical tests for not being able to produce a child while Habib is under no constraints for also doing the same.

The representation of various forms of violence in *Getting Away with Murder* is of wider contemporary relevance as these instances of violence against women are still prevalent in

Indian society despite the unprecedented “modern” growth that the society has seen in various fields. But women’s position/condition more or less remains the same as it used to be in the past they are still the victims of gendered violence in society. Perhaps what is more important is the acquisition of a modern mind-set (both by men and women) to counter such instances of violence against women as suggested by Mehta in this play. The emergence of a somewhat different frame of mind in the male world – the mentality to support women and transform their present controlled - is portrayed through the characters like Anil and Gopal. In the play Anil supports Sonali to recover herself from the painful memories of her past. On the other hand Gopal also does a lot to practically help the victims of witch killing; he even jointly plans with Malu to adopt Minzari’s daughter (Minzari was beaten to death after being declared a witch). *Getting Away with Murder* can be considered as a woman conscious play as it pays attention to the various forms of violence experienced by women, and also the factors responsible for the occurrence of such violence.

*Brides Are Not for Burning* is another woman conscious play by Dina Mehta. The play is an indictment of the dowry system which is still prevalent in the Indian society. It represents how this system is one of the major causes of violence targeted against women. The system of dowry relegates woman not merely to an object of possession but also of purchase. A woman can be bought in the name of marriage and discarded/killed if she fails to satisfy the buyer; who could be any male.

The play centres on the story of Laxmi, a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by her in-laws for not being able to fulfil their demand for dowry. Laxmi is dead when the play begins. In the entire play, Dina Mehta hardly provides any scope for visual enactment of the scene of her death, except in the last scene where Mehta mentions in the stage direction that Laxmi’s death by fire can be enacted behind the screen, as a silhouette. That Laxmi was burnt alive strategically by her in laws is only represented by means of verbal signs. Perhaps, the playwright thinks that such kind representation is a necessity on stage to desensitise the issue.

Laxmi’s unexpected tragic death affects not only Malini, but Anil and their father. In Act I, scene (ii), Mehta describes the effect of this violent act upon their father. While playing cards with Anil, Laxmi’s father constantly speaks about the nature of death caused by fire: “I read somewhere that death by fire is quicker than it seems” (1993:32). As per the stage directions in the play, during this conversation with Anil, Laxmi’s father expresses a childlike anxiety, pauses blankly, weeps and finally freezes on stage after uttering these words: “They let her bum, they let us bum, my daughter...The swine, the swine...” (1993:33). The enactment of such physical behaviour along with the dialogues on stage may more powerfully represent the image of a grief-stricken father. Mehta not only represents the impact of violence on the victim, but also projects its subsequent impact on the entire family of the victim.

When Laxmi sets herself on fire and the smell of burning escapes, Vinod, Arjun and Kalu knock on the door; Tarla shouts begging Laxmi to open the door. But the mother-in-law prevents them all to break open the door and save Laxmi. When Arjun, one of her sons wants to break the door, she said: “Let her finish what she has started inside there...” (1993:80). Hereby Mehta seems to draw attention to the various trajectories through which patriarchal ideologies work in society. The dowry system in a sense is a product patriarchy which

completely devalues women. Instead of rescuing Laxmi from the trap of the dowry system, her mother-in-law serves the purpose of patriarchy by encouraging systematic violence hurled on women by the dowry system. And Vinod, like an obedient child follows his mother to kill his own wife.

The root of Laxmi's victimisation goes back to her past. In her childhood Laxmi is deprived of her education. As Anil points out, Laxmi could not even complete her schooling although she was the brightest among all the children. Partly she is the victim of gender discrimination that necessarily places restrictions on a female child in terms of education also. Laxmi's father also beams a similar attitude towards her. Besides, he also believes in the traditional idea of woman as merely objects of producing a child. Not only the family which follows the patriarchal notion of women as mere objects of subjection and controls them via various violent means; but the legal system also follows the norms of patriarchy to control women. The legal system participates in perpetrating the same sometimes through their indifferent outlook and at other times by their biased attitude. In *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Mehta exposes this legal bias through the powerful dialogues of Malini:

Malini: I spit on your law courts. Plaything in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor. (1993:18)

It is not only Laxmi who is a victim of gendered violence in the play; but Malini who is educated and stronger than Laxmi, also has to go through profound emotional violence. The shock of her sister Laxmi's death and the subsequent happenings create deep psychological wounds in Malini. Then Malini faces Sanjay's betrayal. Sanjay reduces her into an object of fulfilling his sexual needs and finally refuses to marry her. All these drive her into a hysterical state. Malini almost loses her mental balance, becomes hysterical and produces shrill laughter. She is then seen sobbing on stage. Enactment of these non-verbal signs along with her dialogues on stage can turn her into a visual/sensory image representing her trauma. The audience can directly perceive the ongoing war in her from her bodily movements and gestures.

Violence represented in the theatre is not a new phenomenon; however, it did not find expression in the way that it does now. The growing self-awareness among women about their own condition along with education and empowerment has enabled them to speak up openly about their lives. The emergence of the women writers in the field of drama is suggestive of this emergent voice - their own voice through which they dare to represent as well as question their own surrounding. Apart from Dina Mehta and Manjula Padmanabhan, writers like Poile Sengupta, Usha Ganguli and many others have started scripting plays concerning women's lives in Indian society and showing resistance through the characters even sometimes they become traumatised. Therefore, in order to be empowered and protected against male-oppression women must use their "body" as a weapon to fight against their very sexual exploitation "the culturally constructed body then" in the words of Butler "be liberated...to an open future of cultural possibilities".

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