

Discrimination, Violence, and Inequality against women in Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning*

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Abstract

Women's theatre in the context Indian drama was emerged as medium to voice out their problems publicly through various forms like poetry, drama, and prose. The plays produced by women playwrights gave rise to a different genre that concerns with the problems faced by women in our society such as discrimination, violence, injustice, and inequality. This particular genre aims to make visible the unexpressed tabooed issues related to women's life. Dina Mehta utilizes the medium of theater to shed light on pressing societal grievances related to women and advocate for the marginalized sections of the population. This paper intends to explore the themes of women's discrimination, violence, and inequality in Dina Mehta's play, "Brides are Not for Burning."

Key Words: Discrimination, Violence, Inequality and Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning*

Introduction

Dina Mehta with her writing stages the wretchedness of women which are rooted in our culture in the forms of various tradition and ritual such as the practice of dowry in our Indian wedding system. In her play "*Brides are Not for Burning*" she highlights the problem of dowry-death and bride-burning along with other forms of violence and trauma that they bear in order to protect the virtue and name of their families. The play opens with the conversation between Malini, the protagonist and her father, speculating the cause of her sister Lakshmi's death. As we follow the motion of action in the play we get to know how Lakshmi was tortured physically, emotionally, and mentally by her in-laws including her husband for dowry demand which her father failed to fulfilled. On the other hand Malini's father tried to make all the ends hoping to make Lakshmi's in-laws happy as he expresses that thth function of marriage required a significant amount of gold, a substantial sum for a wedding hall, steel utensils, and silk saris. Their demands seemed endless, driven by the misconception that a government clerk earned extra income through illicit means. They believed I had enriched myself through bribes and illegal gains. I allowed them to maintain this belief because I wanted to provide the best for Lakshmi.

Discrimination and Inequality

With the representation of the character of Lakshmi writer present an ordinary woman of our society who faces discrimination and inequality since the very beginning and it start from her own house and ends with her brutal death. She was devoid of studies because of her mother's number of pregnancies and illness, she was denied of education so that she stays home to babysit her siblings. She was married to ruthless person, Vinod, without even asked for her choice. After her marriage she continued facing more discrimination and violence because she couldn't bring enough dowry-amount as imagined by in-laws. Later she was also accused of infertility, although it was Lakshmi's husband in reality who was impotent. Here writer has also focused on the factor of money which becomes a major reason of discrimination in our society, as Malini points out, "Freedom is money in the bank. Do you believe they have trampled Lakshmi if she had a large bank account?, Never."

Another aspect of inequality and discrimination is presented by writer in the form of shattering of laws and justice, and the suppression of the voice of rebellion which we get to witness through the character of Malini. She takes a great interest in her sister's death case and tries to reach out the actual reason behind and sadly couldn't get justice in the end even after knowing the truth. So it's not just the society that create the discrimination but sometimes it's our well structured social system which work differently for poor and rich, men and women, and most importantly for the oppressed and oppressor.

Dina Mehta through her characters in this play tries to highlight all these aspects of discrimination and violence which breeds social injustice and inequality in our society. She, being very apt and realistic in her approach presents the problems as surreal as they are without reaching to an ideal-moralistic ending. By doing so she raises a very important question that requires to be addressed time and again that how we can reach out to our masses to make them realize the problem that is still there and needs to be eradicated with a social revolution against all odds.

Dina Mehta shows us the brutal picture of our so called elite society where women are considered as commodity and puts a picture through which we can see the pivotal yet prevalent forms of discrimination. It's not only practiced through ages old discriminatory practices like dowry, but also deeply inherited in the mind of people and very well practiced in the modern society. Dina Mehta doesn't hesitate to mask out all those poor practices that are forced and only subjected to the women in the name of women being the respect keeper of the family. Through the character of Lakshmi she takes us to the mindset of a helpless married woman of our Indian society who had no other hope from anyone that to just keep quiet and bare the humiliation and violence of her in-laws as well as her husband in order to protect the virtue and respect of her father and maternal family in front of society. At last when she was unable to hold up to the burden of these shallow norms and tradition she was killed brutally and was martyred to keep the virtue and respect protected. Still in India dowry practice is openly accepted in almost all parts of society and very warmly welcome as a well-known tradition but little did we know how many Lakshmi are still silently suffering and are being murdered brutally because they couldn't

fulfilled the demands of their in-laws and husband demanded amount of dowry or gifts taking as they normalize it.

Dina Mehta through her play connects different factors that works in fully function structure to run these discriminatory practices which tells us how these are so well connected that it seems like spider web that no women can get out from. Lakshmi's father gave dowry to her in-laws in order to fulfill his responsibility of good father expecting her to never come back to him again as burden on him while Lakshmi's in-laws kept on asking for more and more money and gift in exchange of keeping that burden that they consider they have received in the form of Lakshmi. More than money it is the mindset of our society which Mehta has targeted as she shows that from birth to death as every stage of her life Lakshmi, the female protagonist was treated nothing more than a burden in the both settings, at her own house by her own father and then at her in-laws house by her husband.

The reasons behind Laxmi's death due to dowry can be attributed to socio-cultural and financial factors, which may provide an explanation for her alleged suicidal motives. However, it is crucial not to overlook the psychological element involved. In Indian households, a daughter's marriage signifies her formal entry into her husband's family, typically dominated by his mother. It entails sharing the same kitchen and vying for the affection of the same person, resulting in tensions and conflicts. A chauvinistic and patriarchal comment underscores the likelihood of conflicts: "Two sets of bosoms are destined for discord." The son's intricate position as both filial offspring and spouse to disparate women, his mother and wife respectively, introduces complexity marked by economic and emotional considerations. The Marfatia family faces similar challenges, as the new bride's presence in Vinod's life strains the mother-son bond, despite Laxmi being submissive and timid. The mother-in-law strategically exploits the point of insufficient dowry to exert control, aiming to achieve three objectives: establishing her authority at home, transferring her son's secret on the bride as an accusation, and securing a more substantial dowry in the marriage settlement.

Nevertheless, transcending these circumstances, the primary catalyst for this dowry-related tragedy lies concealed within Vinod's health. After an exhaustive inquiry, Malini stumbles upon a pivotal revelation. In the midst of a fervent dispute between Malini and Arjun, a stark truth emerges: Vinod is incapacitated in siring offspring, even as Laxmi unjustly bears the blame for barrenness. The family, wrongly placing the onus on Laxmi, including her own father, remains oblivious to the medical verity that implicates her spouse. Arjun's candid disclosure unveils the family's well-guarded secret: Vinod's impotence. This revelation exposes the societal bias against women without legitimate cause. The unceasing false allegations of sterility, destitution, and deceit by the mother-in-law profoundly erode Laxmi's mental well-being. While it was a recurring ordeal in Laxmi's married life, on that fateful evening, the sting of disparaging words propels her towards the kitchen, where she retreats and secures herself within. In her profound desolation, she ignites herself, surrendering to the belief of a "sacred flame" that beckons her to the pyre. Despite Vinod and Kalu's efforts to breach the door, Ma, with a solemn instruction,

implores them to permit Laxmi to conclude what she initiated. Thus, Laxmi tragically becomes one more addition to the enduring inventory of bride immolations.

Commencing with the specific narrative of “dowry death,” the play sequentially plunges into the uncharted realms of our Indian society. Within its intricate tapestry, it probes the institution of matrimony, the intricacies of human bonds, patriarchal prejudices, the imperativeness of women’s enlightenment, unemployment, and the holistic socio-economic panorama of India. It emerges as a poignant critique of an age-old social structure that disregards the worth of women, relegating them to possessions. By amalgamating these societal tribulations into a seamless narrative, the dramatist unveils a vivid tapestry of society before our very eyes. Paradoxically, the specter of death functions as the sole catalyst that unveils these lingering issues, as the silent torment of victimization endures.

Mehta’s intention in this theatrical masterpiece is to illuminate the intricate layers of factors contributing to dowry-related tragedies. Through Laxmi’s tragic demise, she endeavors to underscore the chilling brutality of such occurrences and the profound reverberations they send through the victim’s family. A pivotal theme in the play is the culpability of men in perpetuating coercion against women. In tandem with the character Malini, Anil emerges as a beacon of virtue, taking a stand against the cruel tradition of dowry. Although initially reticent, he eventually encapsulates the play’s core message: “That brides are not meant for the sacrificial flames of avarice and greed, but for a life untainted by such heart-wrenching rituals.”

The play “*Brides Are Not for Burning*” stands as a poignant critique of the myriad societal afflictions that afflicts a sharp focus on the heinous crimes perpetrated against women, notably the harrowing specter of deaths caused by dowry practices. Within its narrative tapestry, the character of Malini emerges as a resolute symbol of resistance against these injustices, while her brother Anil also represents as the playwright’s eloquent mouthpiece, voicing profound concern for the condition of society. Professor Palker and the father, too, embody the playwright’s palpable discontent and opposition.

The three female characters within the play personify distinct perspectives: Laxmi and Tarla, in their acquiescence, symbolize the acceptance of women’s subjugation within the patriarchal framework, while Malini fearlessly unveils the hypocrisy and cruelty inherent in this framework. The drama, by emphasizing the backing and participation of male personas, infuses a tone of hope.

Conclusion

In its essence, the narrative delves into the grave injustices perpetrated against women, encompassing the grim specters of dowry deaths and witch-hunting, in addition to the multitude of challenges that confront women in the Indian context. Mehta deftly employs a unique dramatic technique that portrays the tragedy of Laxmi through the lens of various characters and diverse scenarios, thereby illuminating the pervasive horrors of domestic violence and bride

burning, afflictions endured by countless Indian housewives. Hence, the theatrical production courageously addresses not solely the repugnant transgressions against women within a patriarchal milieu but also an array of concerns tacitly accorded privilege within Indian society.

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