

## Role of Patriarchy in Dina Mehta's Play Brides are not for Burning

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### **Abstract**

*The present study focuses on the Role of Patriarchy in Dina Mehta's Play Brides are not for Burning. Patriarchy is the most persistent and widespread theory. It takes many different forms but the ideas behind it called male domination which exists not just as a product of capitalism but as something quite separate from the capitalist mode of production. Patriarchy contains little understanding of how women's oppression and the nature of the family have changed historically. Patriarchy is a set of social relationships which provide for the collective domination of men over women. It has manifested itself in social, legal, political, and economic organization of different cultures. Historically, the term patriarchy was used to refer to social systems in which power is primarily held by men. Dina Mehta's plays deal with violence against women. It also tries to define women's theatre against male-dominated ideologies and to represent the under-represented aspect of sexual abuse in women's lives. Brides Are Not For Burning won the first prize in a worldwide competition sponsored by the BBC in 1979. The play deals with social problems of dowry and the harassment of brides who don't bring enough dowries.*

**KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Dowry, subjugation, violence, voicelessness.**

### **Introduction:**

Dina Mehta is an accomplished 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 dramatises real life incidents to bring to the limelight social issues such as the evil of dowry, female foeticide, child abuse, rape, subjugation of women, and so on. The purpose of the theatre is to express what is suppressed and Mehta's plays do just that. *Brides Are Not for Burning* won for her first prize in a worldwide playwriting competition sponsored by British Broadcasting Corporation for radio plays in 1979. As the title connotes, the play depicts the harassment that women who fail to bring in enough "dowry" money goods or estate which a woman brings to her husband at the time of the marriage face, which indeed is a social problem that is widespread in India. The play goes beyond the typical feminist agenda by encompassing a broader perspective in which abuse and violence against women is unleashed by not just men but also complicit females caught in a narrow patriarchal order.

Dina Mehta presents in *Brides Are Not for Burning* the burning issue of dowry deaths, along with a series of others that are deftly woven into the mainframe of the narrative. It is the issue of dowry that initiates the probe into others such as the failure of law and justice to protect the subjects, the tardiness of government action, and problems of unemployment as well as environmental and economic issues.

The play begins on a dramatic note with an exchange between Malini and her father who is still in a state of shock over his elder daughter Laxmi's death by immolation at her husband's house. Malini, a college student, suspects her sister Laxmi's death to be a case of bride burning, in other words, a dowry death. Their father, a government clerk, gave his daughter Laxmi in marriage to the affluent businessman Vinod Marfatia, hoping to rescue her from a life of penury, from the constant scrimping and saving to make both ends meet, dreaming of his daughter's happiness in marriage. But that happiness is consumed by the flames. The bitterness in Laxmi's father voice is hard to miss:

### **Main Thrust:**

Dina Mehta holds a very significant position in the best known women playwrights of India. *Brides Are Not for Burning* explains the domestic violence in which women suffer daily. In this play, young bride Laxmi burns to death and her sister Malini is determined that the guilty persons, Laxmi's parents in law and husband, will not go unpunished. In fighting for justice, Malini confronts the society at large that tolerates such crime. In this play, Dina Mehta wants to draw the attention of the passive attitude of the educated society towards the grave oppression being endured by the unlucky victims like women or poor people.

Our patriarchal society has marginalized woman and categorized woman as subaltern. Gender reflections in our society are distributive. The play highlights society's response to the issue of bride-burning through silence which permeates each and every layer of society. *Brides Are Not for Burning* pointed out the fact that the women in country are still burning in the flames of patriarchal system. The issue of dehumanization is tackled here with a realistic consideration by Dina Mehta. The plot of the play is structured in the form of the compulsive suicide of Laxmi, which is presented as an accident by her in laws. The investigating agency proves the same. Malini, sister of Laxmi, tries to dig out the truth behind her sister's suicide but she doesn't get help from her family members, especially her brother, Anil and from Laxmi's friend Tarla, Malini's boyfriend Sanjay. Laxmi from the beginning of her life is tormented. She has to drop her studies in order to look after her younger brother and sister. She is married off by her father who gives her dowry exceeding his capacity but her in-laws always torture her. She is married for five years but fails to conceive. Her husband is impotent, but the blame of not bearing a child also falls on Laxmi. The tragic and pathetic tale of Laxmi is not only her own suffering, but it is the story of countless Indian women whose sufferings strike the playwright's sensitivity and she feels compelled to look at the domestic violence.

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. 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 sufficient what they wanted. 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 it was suppressed by her in-laws.

Malini is not passive like Laxmi. She is a rebel who challenges the system. She is called as a 'angry young woman.' She is presented as the incarnation of protest. She believes that violence is action and that her brother Anil's idealism is ineffective. She protests against the subordination of woman. She is frustrated with the inaction of government in her sister's case. She was once loved 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 determined to give the 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.

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. 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 work. At the end of the play, Anil supports Malini in her quest to unravel the mystery behind Laxmi's death. In the play, beside Malini, Anil achieves the credit. He plays the role of male promotion against dowry. Though initially he is passive, but finally he gives support to Malini.

The greediness of Marfatia family seems so high. They even insure their bride Laxmi for any unnatural accident. After her accidental death by burning, this point comes to notice that she was insured by eighty thousand rupees. Insurance company will compensate for this unnatural murder by refunding the insured money to her husband, Vinod. In order to get a clean chit for this process, Vinod's family has to go through a sarcastically proper investigation with evidences. In Laxmi's case, to hide the reality, the family arranges a fake police panchnama, a group of eyewitnesses from own clan including Vinod himself, mother-in-law, Arjun, their paid servant, Kalu and the neighbour Tarla to whom they fix a settlement with her jobless husband in lieu of her reticence in court. Even, Anil, Laxmi's brother was also offered to get the 10% money as a bribe to shut up his mouth. Even, it also comes to notice that they inform the fire brigade and doctor after several hours of this incident.

Mother-in-law always blames Laxmi for being a sterile woman though doctors have found fault with her husband. Even Laxmi's father also holds Laxmi responsible for her childlessness. The matrimonial system, the complex human relationship, the taboos of patriarchy, need for women literacy, unemployment and socio-economical condition of India are the major issues explained in this play. In the play, beside Malini, Anil achieves the credit who plays the role of male promotion against dowry. Pragnaparamita Biswas rightly explores about *Brides Are Not for Burning* in her article "Politics of Dowry Deaths in India: A Study of Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*."

Embedded within a single structure, the play comments upon the matrimonial system, the complex human relationship, the taboos of patriarchy, need for women literacy, unemployment and above all the holistic view of socio-economical condition of India. It is a critique of the age old social system that does not pay respect to its women and treat them as possession. Accumulating all these ills into a single thread, the dramatist attempts to project a collage of societal before us. Thus, politics of dowry death discloses the so many familiar but nugatory aspects of life. Ironically, only the toll of death can able to remove the mist of it, otherwise silent victimization is going on.

*Brides Are Not for Burning* depicts the harassment that women who fail to bring enough dowries to her husband at the time of the marriage. It is a social problem that is widespread in India. The play goes beyond the typical feminist agenda by encompassing a

broader perspective in which violence against women is unleashed by not just men but also complicit females caught in a narrow patriarchal order.

In *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Dina Mehta rejects both the idealized projections of men's sexual resentments and terrors. Dowry system prevails in India despite the legal sanctions against it. The play in two acts uses this theme to probe the inequalities that beset woman to a secondary existence to this day. There is not merely a recognition of sexism but also a conscious effort on the part of the dramatist to challenge the false patriarchal assumption built on the notion that woman is meant to be a subject of violence and suppression. Laxmi is the victim of the ruthless dowry system that is a product of the patriarchal social order. The play poses several questions that embarrass the patriarchal order. This type of attitude towards marriage and relationships clearly is a pointer to the general disintegration of values in society.

Dina Mehta projects the patriarchy practiced by women themselves. She shows women suffering more at the hands of women than at the hands of men. She has successfully portrayed man-woman relationship in this play. Malini is involved in a physical relationship with Sanjay. She wants to marry with him, but her hopes are shattered when Sanjay refuses to accept her. He says that he will have to marry a girl which is approved by his family. Sanjay is Malini's boyfriend and Anil's college friend. He is very lusty person. Though Sanjay and Malini are not married, the relationship between them is not cordial. Malini is against violence. It shows the vulgarity of Sanjay. He is selfish businessman. He concerns himself only with profits. He doesn't want to live a village life.

Thus, *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a direct attack not only on crimes perpetrated against the woman in a patriarchal society like dowry deaths but also on a series of issues privileged in Indian society. Malini is presented as an incarnation of protest. Her brother, Anil is also made to voice the playwright's concern for society. Professor Palker and the father express the playwright's resentment and dissent. The portrayal of the three women characters is also a pointer to differing attitudes: While Laxmi and Tarla passively accept the patriarchy and the subordinate status of the female. Malini exposes the hypocrisy and inhumanity behind it. Mehta strikes a note of optimism when she stresses the support or involvement of male characters.

To conclude, the play focuses on the atrocities committed against women – dowry deaths and witch – hunting along with various other problems faced by women in India. Domestic violence and bride burning are common atrocities committed on Indian housewives. Dina Mehta has used novel dramatic technique. Through this technique, Mehta explained the tragedy of Laxmi by different characters in different situations. Thus, *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a direct attack not only on crimes perpetrated against the woman in a patriarchal society like dowry deaths but also on a series of issues privileged in Indian society.

## CONCLUSION:

Women are therefore supposed to fight against the social evils and remove the tag of 'vulnerable' from them. Mehta's play makes her readers pass a very strong message of not to fall under the hands of patriarchal society. Women should be like Malini, fierce and ready to take any challenge not like Laxmi, who sacrificed her life when she couldn't find a solution to her issue. Women were always treated as inferior to men, no doubt in that, but time changes only with people. If women continue to accept the way they had been always living then things can never change. All women should be encouraged to get their basic rights and fulfill their ambitions just like Laxmi had of studying but was forced to sacrifice even that

because of family pressure. Oppression of women will limit and maybe someday abolish only when women fight for themselves. Women are termed as emotional, soft and vulnerable beings who would obey to whatever men command, this mentality should be changed. A small step can change the entire lives of not only one but many women.

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