

Violence and Survival in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*

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Abstract

Dina Mehta is a Parsi writer who has exposed the atrocities inflicted upon women in a patriarchal society through *Getting Away with Murder*. She has unravelled the layers of pain through the story of three friends- Mallika, Sonali and Razia in *Getting away with Murder*. In this play, Dina Mehta has raised her voice on various issues of violence against women like rape, child sexual abuse, female foeticide, gender inequality and blind adherence to superstitions. A woman, whether house wife or a working woman, educated or uneducated has to go through the same plight of turmoil (physical, mental, emotional etc.) In this paper, by involving theories on violence, I have tried to analyse the truth which Dina Mehta has revealed through her play *Getting Away with Murder*. The play ends on a positive note of survival which became possible due to the close bond of trust and cooperation between three friends.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Violence, Survival, Gender inequality, Sexual Abuse

In a patriarchal society, women are subjected to various kinds of atrocities, abuse and violence becomes an integral part of their life. Violence could be physical, mental or verbal and it leaves a deep impact on the psyche of a female and on those who witness it. Dina Mehta is a Parsi writer whose works include *Getting Away with Murder*, *Brides are Not for*

Burning, Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic, Mila in Love etc. Mehta brings out the claustrophobic life of women along with their suffering and suffocation. Women are treated as a commodity and their traumatized self has been reflected. She has unravelled the problems which a female undergoes within the territory of the household and outside it. She has also exposed the layers of the female psyche representing mental dilemma and emotional turmoil. Mehta has voiced various issues of violence against women like rape, child sexual abuse, female foeticide, gender inequality and blind adherence to superstitions through *Getting Away with Murder*. The play was published in the year 2000 as a part of *Body Blows Women, Violence and Survival* – a collection of three plays by Seagull Books. “The play was first performed by Indus International, a socio-cultural group for women at British Council Theatre in Mumbai in 1990” (Jeevitha and Subramanian 15). Mehta has portrayed the lives of three friends- Mallika, Sonali and Razia, who are struggling against the patriarchal society and are marginalized.

Power theory of domestic violence is presented through the story of Sonali. Power differentials are exhibited through age and gender. Traditionally, males who have greater and stronger access to valued resources exert domination over the weak or marginalized. V Geetha in her book *Patriarchy* said:

Women argued that sexual assault was not a crime against chastity or female moral worth; rather it was an expression of male sexual authority, which in turn was backed by the power of class, caste...women’s bodies were often routinely viewed as object of male desire and lust...Women’s groups pointed to the range of sexual crimes that were directed at women-child abuse, incest, marital rape- to argue that their social existence was invariably sexualized and therefore not seen as worthy of equality or justice. The family and larger kin group, they noted, actively aided this sexualisation of

women's bodies by valorizing their fertility and chastity. It was this concerted violence against women, they insisted which secured the patriarch's power, both at the level of the family and society. (191)

The play begins with Mallika (Malu) waiting for Sonali in a restaurant and a stranger intrudes into her space trying to be over friendly, Malu rebukes him. When both the friends meet, Sonali asks Mallika to persuade Raziya to do an amniocentesis test on her (Sonali) so that she can know whether the child in her womb is a girl or a boy?

MALU: You're talking of amniocentesis? But isn't that test banned here?

SONALI: Which means nothing, as Raziya herself will tell you. It's banned for the purpose of sex determination, but allowed as a probe to detect abnormalities in the foetus. So, it's no big deal for Razzle Dazzle to do it for me.

MALU: But why do you want it? I take it there is no family history of genetic disorders-

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MALU: Like, will it be a boy? Will it be a girl? Okay Sonali, suppose Raziya does the test under whatever pretext- and it turns out to be a girl. What then? (Sharply) Sonali?

SONALI: If it's a girl I shall abort her. (Mehta 62)

Mallika was shocked at this decision of Sonali and says that the prejudice of gender inequality was an issue with ignorant women or who were deprived or suffering the drudgery of life or those who consider daughters as some liability. They want to get the daughters married by offering a dowry which will further drown them into poverty or debts. She further questions her that how does it matter to a person like Sonali, who is going to have her first child? Malu was surprised by this opinion of Sonali and one also feel the effects of

stereotypical thinking on an educated modern woman for whom desperate violence of abortion seems a better option than giving birth to a girl child. On top of that, it becomes the symbol of emancipation, choice and free will. Sonali further adds “Well, my mother always said that a woman’s failure to bear a son is just retribution for misdeeds in her past life” (Mehta 63). This is probably the result of being nurtured in a traditional mindset where females are taught that they are subservient to males, inferior to them and have a secondary position. Malini says this test instigates multiple murders and not freedom, but Sonali considers her decision as a symbol of emancipation as it’s her body and she has all the right to make a choice. Malu tries to convince her that it’s not liberation but female foeticide and she is awarding death to her own unborn daughter. It is insane and not woman power, she cannot do this, she is not God. Sonali says “Shut up, shut up! (Thumping the table) To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude! I know, I know!” (Mehta 63). She was suffering and struggling all alone from psychosis and on the verge of nervous breakdown, but she was fortunate to get a husband like Arun, who supported her and said that a girl or a boy child would be equal for him, rather he wished to have a baby girl. Sonali was the victim of child sexual abuse and out of anxiety and terror, she tortured herself so much that it caused miscarriage in her previous pregnancy. Therefore, this time she wants Razia to perform amniocentesis to find out the sex of the unborn child, knowing that it’s a crime. Jasbir Jain in *Women in Patriarchy* said “The woman’s ultimate fulfilment may lie in motherhood but she should accept this duty willingly, after weighing her mental and physical strengths, and not under duress. Something that is accepted under compulsion or in the absence of alternatives cannot be called duty.” (229)

The issue of child sexual abuse has also been highlighted by Dina Mehta through Sonali who has been sexually abused by her uncle Narotam- a widower who satisfied his lust by committing a heinous crime when she was a child. This was embedded so deeply in her

psyche that in later life she suffered from anxiety pangs, psychosis, and hallucinations. Finkelhor's theory of child sexual abuse states that:

Sex with children is emotionally satisfying to the offender (Emotional Congruence); Men who offend are sexually aroused by a child (Sexual arousal); Men have sex with children because they are unable (Blockage) to meet their sexual needs in more socially appropriate ways; and finally, that these men become disinhibited and behave in ways they would not normally behave (Disinhibition). (Ward 294)

On the basis of Finkelhor's theory, it could be said that Narotam, whose wife was dead, turned to Sonali in order to satisfy his lust without even thinking that it was a heinous crime, he was her uncle and above all she was a child. Such kind of sexual abuse hindered her physical and mental development. The pain which Sonali has endured must have torn her from inside. She was unable to show helplessness, pent-up anger and frustration in front of anyone. Sometimes she used to feel depressed, scream all alone, these characteristics indicate post-traumatic personality disorder.

The silence was killing her soul. This was also the reason that she did not want to have a girl child to suffer the same fate of cruelty and pain in a patriarchal society.

Women suffer violence not only at home but at work field also that has been represented through the life of Mallika and Thelma- her secretary. Simone de Beauvoir said "Women are born to suffer, 'they say; 'it's like-nothing can be done about it" (613). Mr. Pinglay was a male chauvinist, a co-worker of Mallika who creates inconvenience in the workplace both for Mallika and Thelma. He fixes Mallika's meetings with the clients without any prior information and is prejudiced about females. Pinglay fixes Mallika's meeting with a client Raghunath for lunch, when Mallika checks her diary, she says her meeting was fixed with auditors and S.B. Ramnath but there is no lunch date with Raghunath. Pinglay replies:

PINGLAY: Who else? The appointment for you I made myself. Today morning itself, when you were so late coming.

MALU: For me! You made a lunch appointment for me without consulting me? (Mehta 68)

Mr. Pinglay also tries to take advantage of his position in the company by blackmailing Thelma and making inappropriate advances towards her. When Thelma gives her resignation, Mallika confronts her and asks about the problem to which she hesitatingly replies that Pinglay “makes vulgar talk...and- and wicked gestures” (Mehta 70). She adds:

THELMA(nods): He’s always telling me his wife is old enough to be pensioned off...and asking me to accompany him to...hotels outside the city.

MALU: How long has this been going on?

THELMA: Since February. When he caught me making long distance calls to Jabalpur. When mother took ill. (Mehta 70)

Mr. Pinglay attitude towards Thelma and Mallika shows how men exert their authority on females whom they consider to be weak, meek and subservient. He tries to humiliate Mallika by fixing her meetings prior to taking her consent, just to show that he is superior to her and also tries to exploit Thelma because she was junior to him in rank and was scared of him. He was one of those men who could not assimilate that a woman was doing better than him. His ego, pride and male chauvinist attitude boost him to take any step, in order to control a woman. It was only Mallika’s courage that made her teach a lesson to Mr. Pinglay.

Raziya is a doctor by profession, an educated woman who is subservient to her husband and accepts his desire to marry another woman. She believes that she cannot provide children to him and is a barren woman. Raziya feels that the identity of a woman will be complete only when she becomes a mother; a woman who cannot bear a child has no identity, no life and does not have a right to live happily with her husband. It is on this basis that she

permits her husband to marry another woman. Malu rejects this meek surrender of Raziya and says that Hamid could also be the reason that she is not able to conceive. She reprimands Raziya for accepting such humiliation, however Raziya says:

You think I haven't asked myself that? (With pain) I find an ancient tyranny at work with me that makes me believe that a man's desire for children must be satisfied. Just as Sonali believes that a woman's inferior status is partially redeemed when she becomes a mother of sons. And just as you, my dear Malu, believe that a man has the right to the body of a woman younger than he-where are you going?

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RAZIYA. Go, then! But don't fool yourself that you and I are so different, Malu!(Mehta 78)

Raziya even says considering man as a villain in the fight for equality would not improve conditions. The enemy lies within. "It is in our minds, Mallika we are underlings!"(Mehta 78). Raziya is also pointing towards the main problem of the patriarchal society that women has been marginalized to such an extent that they have adopted and assimilated the stereotypical traditions and views. Simone de Beauvoir said that women "owns nothing, women does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms the part of the patrimony of a man: first her father, then her husband...a wife is his property like a slave, a beast of burden, or a chattel, a man can naturally have as many wives as he pleases...the husband can put away his wives at his caprice, society according them almost no security" (114). Raziya is a working woman; she is still subordinated to her husband and feels that the status of woman improves after she gives birth to a child. Women do not have any identity beyond being a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and a mother. Hamid is exploiting Raziya mentally; it seems that she is suffering from a personality disorder of borderline personalities

which is characterized by instability of identity and relationship. She suffers from the fear of abandonment, depression and being moody, but sometimes in severe cases, it leads to self-destruction and suicidal tendencies, as in the case of Sonali. The problem is not only the authority of males but the traditional mindset which has been transferred from one generation to another not only through males but females as well. Mallika argues that it's thinking and attitude that is required to be changed in order to bring changes in the society.

Mehta has also concentrated upon the issue of blind adherence to superstitions through Gopal (Sonali's brother) who is a social activist and works for the empowerment of women in villages. He protests against the practice of burning women alive after being branded as a witch. Beauvoir voiced that political power has always been in the hands of males and the society in which we live is male-dominated. Gopal tells Mallika about the condition of widows or deserted women in Chaibasa who are accused of being witches by their male relatives in order to usurp their land. They are bullied, threatened and the prejudice is so deep-rooted that even the police cannot do anything. Gopal tells Mallika the story of Dulkha Devi of Tharwar "The day after I snapped her in the bazaar, she was stripped naked within the sight of the police station, her face blackened, her head shaved, forced to run round the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till, she died" (Mehta 80).

Women are being subjected to violence, tortured physically, mentally and emotionally so that they can be easily controlled and subordinated. Gopal fights for the rights of such marginalized women. This brutality of the males in exerting their authority and power has been criticised by Dina Mehta.

It appears that the play belongs to an activist theatre that has been written in order to create a social and political consciousness regarding violence inflicted upon women in various ways. Mehta has used the technique of soliloquy to bring out the trauma of Sonali. "Appropriate verbal and visual signs are also used by the playwright to exhibit the intense

pain and unstable condition of Sonali. Her acute headaches, hysterical reactions, aggressive behaviour like throwing away of coffee mug exhibits her suppressed anger of being sexually harassed and her inability to speak about the inner turmoil and suffering” (Activist theatre in India). The change in the voice of Sonali while she stands in front of the mirror symbolizes the scars of the traumatic incident (sexual abuse) that happened to her in the past and its repercussions in the present. She acts like an eight-year-old child and suddenly transforms and comes to her real age (adult) and laughs hysterically.

SONALI. Dear God, I can't take more of this...Someone must help...help me (moves to the mirror, stares into her face intently then begins to speak in a petulant 8-year-old voice as she regresses in time). Don't want to sit near him, Mother. Don't like to be touched. Don't like to be tickled... (looks away from the mirror and declaims in her normal voice) ...Your fingers are not kind, they hurt...Stop it! stop! (Low on a note of pain and fear)...You have no other work, old woman, but to peep at me-like him! Every time I took a bath I could hear him outside...breathing...waiting to look at me...(screaming) get away from my door...get away or I'll tell Anil you're hounding me... (Mehta 66)

These are some of the techniques used by Dina Mehta to showcase the mental and physical trauma of a sexually abused victim. Sonali's case exhibits violence begets violence i.e one violence becomes the root cause of other violence. She was the victim of child sexual abuse. Violence was inflicted upon her but she was unable to pour out her pain in front of anyone. On the contrary, she felt that if the foetus was a girl, she would abort it. She does not want to give birth to a female child to face the same destiny which she had faced in her childhood. Here the victim becomes the victimizer. In fact, she already had one miscarriage because of her trauma and hysteria. The female characters also become the mirrors of reality

for each other. They become each other's reality check. This play has also presented a contrast between the friendships of women that existed in past ages, which are generally identified as rivalry between female characters. However, in this play we find that it's the bond of friendship between three friends (Mallika, Sonali and Raziya) that gave them the strength to fight their individual battles and support each other in a crisis. The marginalized community of females are also connected by an invisible thread of the collective unconscious as these crimes against women were done in the past and still exist in the present, so all of them are aware of the pain of violence of one kind or other. Dina Mehta sticks to a never give up attitude and expressed that a fighting instinct for survival is necessary.

“Feminism has always meant independence of mind and spirit and body. Feminist efforts to end patriarchal domination and insist on the eradication of exploitation and oppression of women in family context and in all other intimate relationships” (Singh 114). The lives of three friends were inter-connected; they can understand the sufferings, pain and trauma as all of them were sailing in the same boat of marginalization. All of them were females who have suffered and are still suffering the consequences of the stereotypical thinking of a traditional patriarchal society. These women acted as each other's supporters and comforters and are liberated from all the problems and suffering by helping each other. The only source of hope and survival was to defy the patriarchal norms and prejudiced mindset, to understand each other's problems, stand by them, face them unflinchingly and change the orthodox mindsets which have been engraved in the psyche of people in the society. Dina Mehta has pointed out that the attitude of both male and female should change, then only an equal status would be granted to women and she would be free from any kind of abuse or violence. The struggle for survival is presented through the lives of the three female characters by Dina Mehta. She also paved a path to show the world that theatre can act as a

medium to make people understand that basic human rights should be granted to both male and female alike to form an unprejudiced and unbiased society.

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