Silence and Subversion in Dina Mehta's Play *Brides Are Not for Burning*

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Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted dimensions of protest in Dina Mehta's powerful play *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1993), which confronts the pervasive social evil of dowry deaths in India. Through an analysis of character dynamics, thematic concerns, and dramatic techniques, the study explores how Mehta transforms personal tragedy into political commentary. The play transcends the specific issue of bride burning to encompass broader critiques of patriarchal structures, judicial corruption, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. By creating Malini as a protagonist who embodies resistance, Mehta demonstrates how drama can function as an instrument of social awakening. The paper argues that the play's enduring significance lies in its refusal to offer simplistic solutions while compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic injustice.

Keywords: Protest drama, Dowry deaths, Patriarchy, Feminist theatre, Social justice.

Introduction

Theatre has historically served as a mirror to society, reflecting not only its glories but also its deepest scars. Among literary forms, drama possesses a unique capacity to generate immediate emotional resonance, creating what Augusto Boal termed "rehearsals for revolution," spaces where audiences can confront oppression and imagine alternatives. In the

Indian context, where tradition and modernity perpetually negotiate their boundaries, women playwrights have increasingly turned to theatre as a medium to articulate dissent against deeply entrenched patriarchal practices. Dina Mehta stands among the foremost voices in this tradition, using the stage to expose the violence that lurks beneath the surface of conventional respectability.

Brides Are Not for Burning emerges from a specific historical moment, the late twentieth century when India witnessed growing activism against dowry related violence, culminating in legislative reforms and the strengthening of the Dowry Prohibition Act. Yet the play's concerns remain distressingly contemporary. The National Crime Records Bureau continues to document thousands of dowry deaths annually, suggesting that legal remedies alone cannot address the cultural foundations that sustain such practices. Mehta's contribution lies in her willingness to probe beneath statistics, to transform anonymous victims into recognizable human beings whose suffering demands not merely sympathy but systemic transformation.

The play's title itself constitutes a protest, echoing Christopher Fry's *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948) while substituting whimsical comedy with urgent social critique. Where Fry's Jennet Jourdemayne faces accusations of witchcraft in a medieval setting that allows for comic resolution, Mehta's Laxmi faces a more mundane but equally lethal form of persecution, one rooted not in supernatural fears but in the all too material calculus of dowry transactions. This paper explores how Mehta constructs protest through multiple registers: character, dialogue, theme, and structure, creating a work that functions simultaneously as documentation, indictment, and call to action.

Dina Mehta: The Playwright as Social Critic

Dina Mehta's literary career spans multiple genres, including novels, short stories, and radio plays, but her dramatic works most fully realize her commitment to social

engagement. Born in 1928, Mehta came of age during India's struggle for independence and its subsequent experiments with democracy and development. This historical positioning informed her understanding of how political liberation does not automatically translate into social justice, particularly for women who continue to negotiate patriarchal constraints within the framework of formal equality.

Ralph Yarrow observes that Mehta's play *Getting Away with Murder* (1989) functions as "a provocation, a raging challenge to our orderly pigeon holing minds" (5). This characterization applies equally to *Brides Are Not for Burning*, which refuses comfortable categorization. The play is neither pure agitprop nor detached aesthetic exercise; instead, it occupies the productive tension between art and advocacy, using dramatic conventions to advance political arguments while maintaining sufficient complexity to resist didacticism.

Mehta's decision to write in English reflects both practical and political considerations. As M.K. Naik argues, the Indian English playwright need have "no qualm at all" about linguistic authenticity, for "in making his Indian characters speak in English, the playwright needs... to create living characters in living situations, and the language will take care of itself" (91). English provides access to wider audiences, both within India's multilingual landscape and internationally, while also signalling the playwright's refusal to confine "Indian experience" to any single linguistic tradition.

The Architecture of Protest: Structure and Character

Malini: The Embodiment of Dissent

At the heart of *Brides Are Not for Burning* stands Malini, a character whose very name evokes the goddess Lakshmi while her actions subvert conventional expectations of feminine passivity. Unlike her sister Laxmi, who accepts suffering with the silence expected of Indian wives, Malini refuses complicity with the forces that destroyed her sibling. She

functions as what might be termed a protagonist of conscience, a character whose moral outrage drives the dramatic action while forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths.

Malini's protest operates at multiple levels. Initially, she challenges the official narrative surrounding Laxmi's death, refusing to accept the coroner's verdict of accident. Her sarcastic response to this verdict reveals both intellectual clarity and emotional devastation: "They decided Laxmi's sari was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident" (Mehta 15). The repetition of "by accident" exposes the absurdity of explanations that multiply improbabilities to avoid confronting murder. Through Malini, Mehta demonstrates how official discourse functions to normalize violence, transforming systematic killing into isolated incidents requiring no fundamental social change.

Malini extends her critique beyond individual case to systemic patterns, citing statistics that transform personal tragedy into social indictment: "Last year 350 women died of burns in the city alone, some of them over insured wives" (Mehta 15). This movement between particular and general characterizes the play's protest strategy, refusing to isolate Laxmi's death as exceptional while insisting that each death demands accountability. The reference to insurance claims introduces economic dimensions often obscured in discussions of dowry violence, suggesting that murder for profit operates within rational calculative frameworks rather than representing inexplicable outbursts of familial conflict.

The complexity of Malini's characterization prevents her from becoming merely a mouthpiece for authorial views. She exhibits contradictions that render her human rather than emblematic. Despite her Marxist sympathies and commitment to the oppressed, she confesses attraction to wealth and privilege: "I wish to cross over, to be where the fortunes are, where the fun is and where the lights are" (Mehta 87). This admission acknowledges that revolutionary commitment does not eliminate desire for the very comforts revolution would abolish.

Laxmi and Tarla: The Faces of Complicity

If Malini represents active resistance, her sister Laxmi and neighbour Tarla illustrate different modes of engagement with patriarchal structures. Laxmi embodies traditional feminine virtue, passive, long suffering, and silent, but Mehta refuses to romanticize this victimhood. Her death results not merely from external violence but from internalized expectations that prevented her from seeking help or asserting rights. The play thus critiques not only perpetrators but also the cultural conditioning that teaches women to accept suffering as destiny.

Tarla presents a more complex case of complicity shaped by material constraint. Forced by poverty and an errant husband to testify in favor of the Marfatias, she participates in covering up murder while remaining sympathetic as a character. Her situation illustrates what feminist theorist's term constrained choice, decisions made within circumstances so limited that meaningful agency becomes impossible. Mehta refuses easy judgment while insisting that such choices have real consequences, contributing to the perpetuation of violence.

Kumar and Narendra observe that in Mehta's play, women themselves "contribute to the perpetration of patriarchy that objectifies and destroys them" (146). The mother in law and sisters in law who torment Laxmi represent this phenomenon most starkly, their cruelty exceeding that of male characters that remain relatively passive in the narrative. This representation challenges simplistic narratives locating all oppression in male agency, acknowledging instead how patriarchal systems reproduce themselves through women's internalization and enforcement of gendered expectations.

Anil: Masculinity and Alternative Possibilities

Anil, Malini's brother, introduces another dimension to the play's protest. Initially positioned as idealistic but ineffectual, more comfortable teaching village children than

confronting urban corruption, he gradually evolves toward greater engagement with his sister's quest for justice. His presence suggests that meaningful social change requires male participation, that feminism cannot succeed as women's struggle alone.

Anil's critique of Malini's turn toward revolutionary violence articulates an alternative vision of resistance:

> "You are not really sacrificing your life to make the world a better place, but you think you don't very much want to live. The question then is, are you capable of living?... To live you have to love yourself. And to love is to do something far more difficult than to give way to savagery" (Mehta 91).

This speech refuses romanticization of violence while acknowledging the despair that drives individuals toward extreme solutions. It suggests that sustainable resistance requires not merely opposition to injustice but affirmation of life itself, a difficult balance that the play refuses to resolve neatly.

Burning Issues: Thematic Dimensions of Protest

Dowry Deaths and the Commodification of Women

The immediate occasion for Mehta's protest is the practice of dowry, whose persistence despite legal prohibition reveals the gap between formal equality and substantive justice. Laxmi's father articulates the economic logic driving this system when he describes marriage negotiations as transaction: "Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2,000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saries of silk... Their expectations were endless because they imagined a government clerk makes so much on the side" (Mehta 13). The commodification of women within marriage markets transforms daughters into financial instruments whose value depends on accompanying assets rather than intrinsic worth.

Mehta exposes the violence inherent in this logic through Malini's bitter observation: "Isn't it funny... that with a fat dowry Laxmi would have been a flaming success overnight,

instead of a heap of ashes today?" (51). The word "flaming" carries dual meaning, connecting commercial success to the literal flames that consumed Laxmi's body. This linguistic compression demonstrates Mehta's technique of using language itself as protest, revealing connections that conventional discourse obscures.

The play challenges assumptions that dowry represents traditional practice requiring modernization rather than symptom of deeper pathologies. Malini 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" (Mehta 21). This materialist analysis suggests that women's vulnerability stems not from insufficient modernization but from economic dependence within systems where money determines value. Freedom requires not merely cultural change but economic transformation enabling women's independence from familial calculations.

The Failure of Legal Institutions

Mehta's critique extends beyond perpetrators to encompass institutions ostensibly designed to protect victims. The police, courts, and legal system appear not as neutral arbiters but as participants in covering up violence, serving interests of wealth and power rather than justice. Malini's fury targets these institutions directly: "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" (Mehta 18).

This institutional critique acknowledges what critical legal scholars term law's violence, the ways legal procedures can perpetuate rather than remedy injustice. The coroner's inquest that declares Laxmi's death accidental exemplifies how legal forms legitimate extra-legal violence, transforming murder into misfortune requiring no systemic response. Malini's friend Roy articulates this cynicism: "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?" (Mehta 19).

By connecting violence against women to violence against Dalits and other marginalized groups, Mehta suggests that dowry deaths represent not isolated gender based crime but symptom of broader patterns in which law serves property rather than persons. This intersectional analysis prevents the play from offering feminist critique isolated from other forms of social analysis, insisting instead that gender justice connects to economic and caste justice.

Media and the Politics of Visibility

The play also critiques media practices that render certain deaths invisible while sensationalizing others. Malini notes bitterly: "Of course there is no report of it in the papers. We are not important enough" (Mehta 11). This observation acknowledges that news coverage follows hierarchies of significance determined by class and social position rather than intrinsic importance. Poor women's deaths lack newsworthiness because their lives lacked value within dominant frameworks.

Mehta's critique of media anticipates later scholarship on what Judith Butler terms grievability, the cultural frameworks determining which deaths merit public mourning and which pass unnoticed. By making Laxmi's death visible through theatre, Mehta challenges media's power to determine significance, insisting that audiences acknowledge suffering that newspapers ignore. Theatre becomes counter media, creating visibility that mainstream outlets deny.

Since winning first prize in the BBC World Playwriting Competition in 1979, *Brides Are Not for Burning* has attracted scholarly attention for its fusion of feminist critique with broader social analysis. Critics have noted the play's refusal to isolate gender oppression from economic exploitation, its willingness to complicate easy narratives of victim and

perpetrator. S. Ramaswamy emphasizes the play's stage worthiness, its effective use of theatrical conventions to advance political argument while maintaining dramatic tension.

The play's continued relevance reflects the persistence of issues it addresses. Despite legal reforms and increased awareness, dowry related violence continues to claim thousands of lives annually in India. Mehta's contribution lies not in offering solutions but in refusing to let audiences forget that statistics represent individual women whose deaths demand not merely sympathy but systemic transformation.

Conclusion

Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* demonstrates theatre's capacity to function simultaneously as art and advocacy, entertainment and education, mirror and hammer. Through her creation of Malini as protagonist of conscience, her exposure of connections between gender violence and economic exploitation, and her refusal of easy resolution, Mehta crafts a work that continues to speak to contemporary conditions. The play's title declares its thesis: brides are not for burning, women are not fuel for patriarchal fires, human life cannot be reduced to cost benefit calculation within marriage markets. Yet Mehta recognizes that declaration alone accomplishes little; protest requires persistent engagement with institutions, ideologies, and practices that perpetuate violence. Her play offers not solutions but questions, questions that, as Ravindran notes, remain unanswered, demanding audience response beyond theatrical encounter.

In the end, Mehta's protest operates through indirection as much as direct statement. By making visible what official discourse renders invisible, by giving voice to those silenced by violence and its cover up, by connecting individual tragedy to systemic critique, she creates theatre that functions as what Augusto Boal termed rehearsal for revolution, space where audiences can imagine alternatives while recognizing obstacles to their realization. The

voice of protest she articulates continues to resonate because the issues she addresses continue to burn.

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