

WOMEN AS AN 'OBJECT' IN DIANA MEHTA'S PLAY BRIDES ARE NOT FOR BURNING

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ABSTRACT

India has very long history, where women have been treated as Goddess like Durga, Kali, Sarswati, Laxmi, Ganga etc. but on the other hand women are also treated as a doll, toy, only as an object. Dina Mehta a Gujarati play writer also show discrimination and exploitation of women in her well known play Brides are Not for Burning. It highlights the place of women in society after her marriage. In India, as a patriarchal society, there are very less power in the hands of women. The present paper tries to focus the position of women which presented in the drama of Dina Mehta.

Key words: Dina Mehta, Brides are Not for Burning, women, object, play, etc.

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The present paper will highlight the various situations of women in Indian through past and present as well how women have been treated as object in Indian society. Hence, it very essential to see the past and present situations of women in Indian society before studying *Brides are not for Burning*. In ancient India, the position of women has been issue to many great changes over the past few eras. From similarprestige with men in ancient timesthrough the low points of the medieval period,to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices in India including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition. However, women in India remain to face the behaviour of as an object,where they have to tolerate rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, child marriage, domestic violence, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion, rape, sexual harassmt, traffickingand the forced prostitution of young girls. According to a global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the "fourth most dangerous country" in the world for womenand the worst country for women among the G20 countries.

According to scholars, women in ancient India enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. Women are enjoined to be of service to their husbands. As per the studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However in approximately 500 B.C., the status of women began to decline, and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Empire and Christianity later worsened women's freedom and rights.The practice of child marriages is believed to have started around the sixth century.

Indian women's position in society further deteriorated during the medieval period, when child marriages and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some communities in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought purdah to Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, some of Devadasis were sexually exploited. Polygamy was practised among Hindu Kshatriya rulers for some political reasons. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas of the house. The Bhakti movements tried to restore women's status and questioned certain forms of oppression. Guru Nanak advocated that women be allowed to lead religious assemblies; to lead congregational hymn singing called Kirtan or Bhajan; to become members of religious management committees; to lead armies on the battlefield; to have equality in marriage. Traditions such as Sati, Jauhar, and Devadasi among some communities have been banned and are largely defunct in modern India. However, some instances of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The purdah is still practiced by Indian women in some communities. Child marriage remains common in rural areas, although it is illegal under current Indian law.

In 1927, The All India Women's Education Conference was held in Pune, it became a major organisation in the movement for social change. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed, stipulating fourteen as the minimum age of marriage for a girl. Women also played an important part in India's independence struggle. Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

Indian Constitution assures to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special

provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), relinquishes practices insulting to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42).

Indian Feminism started in late 1970s. Mathura rape case was the one of the first national-level issues that brought women's groups together. The protests, widely covered by the national media, forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code; and created a new offence, custodial rape. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety, and women's literacy. Since drunkenness is frequently related with violence against women in India, many women groups propelled anti-liquor campaigns in India. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the Shariat law and have criticized the triple talaq system.

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti). The National Policy for The Empowerment Of Women came was passed in 2001. In 2010 March 9, one day after International Women's day, Rajya Sabha passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33% of seats in India's Parliament and state legislative bodies be reserved for women. In rural India in the agriculture and allied industrial sectors, females account for as much as 89.5% of the labour force. In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at 55% to 66% of the total labour. According to a 1991 World Bank report, women accounted for 94% of total employment in dairy production in India. Women constitute 51% of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises.

In most Indian families, women did not own any property in their own names, and did not get a share of parental property. Due to weak enforcement of laws protecting them, women continue to have little access to land and

property. In fact, some of the laws discriminate against women, when it comes to land and property rights. The Hindu personal laws of 1956 (applying to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains) gave women rights to inheritances. However, sons had an independent share in the ancestral property, while the daughters' shares were based on the share received by their father as well the amendment of the Hindu laws in 2005, gives women same status as men.

As a religious country, in India, most of the people is superstitious; hence Indian women have to face domestic violence. Police records in India show a high incidence of crimes against women. The National Crime Records Bureau stated in 1998 that by 2010 growth in the rate of crimes against women would outstrip the population growth rate. Earlier, many crimes against women were not reported to police due to the social disgrace attached to rape and molestation. Official statistics show a dramatic increase in the number of reported crimes against women. According to UNICEF's "State of the World's Children-2009" report, 47% of India's women aged 20-24 were married before the legal age of 18, rising to 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India.

The number of incidents of domestic violence is higher among the lower Socio-Economic Classes (SECs). The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 came into force on 26 October 2006. In 1961, the Government of India passed the Dowry Prohibition Act, making dowry demands in wedding arrangements illegal. However, many cases of dowry-related domestic violence, suicides and murders have been reported. In the 1980s, numerous such cases were reported. In 1985, the Dowry Prohibition (maintenance of lists of presents to the bride and bridegroom) Rules were framed. According to these rules, a signed list should be maintained of presents given at the time of the marriage to the bride and the bridegroom. The list should contain a brief description of each present, its approximate value, the name of who has given the present, and relationship to the recipient. However, such rules are rarely enforced.

A 1997 report claimed that each year at least 5,000 women in India die dowry-related deaths, and at least a dozen die each day in 'kitchen fires' thought to be intentional. The term for this is "bride burning" and is criticized within India itself. Amongst the urban educated, such dowry abuse has reduced considerably. Female infanticide (killing of girl infants) is still prevalent in some rural areas. Sometimes this is infanticide by neglect, for example families may not spend money on critical medicines or withhold care from a sick girl.

Rape in India has been described by Radha Kumar as one of India's most common crimes against women and by the UN's human-rights chief as a "national problem". In the 1980s, women's rights groups lobbied for marital rape to be declared unlawful, as until 1983, the criminal law (amendment) act stated that "sexual intercourse by a man with his wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age is not rape". Marital rape is still not a criminal offence. While per-capita reported incidents are quite low compared to other countries, even developed countries, a new case is reported every 20 minutes.

Sexual harassment or molestation of women by men is also a major problem in India which each of us hear in society. Many activists blame the rising incidents of sexual harassment against women on the influence of "Western culture". In 1987, The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act was passed to prohibit indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, and paintings or in any other manner. Of the total number of crimes against women reported in 1990, half related to molestation and harassment in the workplace. In 1997, in a landmark judgement, the Supreme Court of India took a strong stand against sexual harassment of women in the workplace. The Court also laid down detailed guidelines for prevention and redress of grievances. The National Commission for Women subsequently elaborated these guidelines into a Code of Conduct for employers. In 2013 India's top court investigated on a law graduate's allegation that she was sexually harassed by a recently retired Supreme Court judge.

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act was passed in 1956. However many cases of trafficking of young girls and women have been reported. These women are either forced into prostitution, domestic work or child labour. Women in India are also facing the problem of health, family planning, sex ratios and sanitations. In rural areas, schools have been reported to have gained the improved sanitation facility. Given the existing socio-cultural norms and situation of sanitation in schools, girl students are forced not to relieve themselves in the open unlike boys. Lack of facilities in home forces women to wait for the night to relieve them and avoid being seen by others. In 2011 a "Right to Pee" campaign began in Mumbai, India's largest city. Women, but not men, have to pay to urinate in Mumbai, despite regulations against this practice. City officials have agreed to build hundreds of public toilets for women in Mumbai, and some local legislators are now promising to build toilets for women in every one of their districts.

Although all above mentioned facilities are there; even after, still now-a-days too, in twenty-first century, women of India are facing the devastation in society. Dina Mehta in her play deals one of such problem of dowry and domestic violence. The very title of the play *Brides are Not for Burning* is a theatrical presentation of the violence against women by family or in-laws of the society. The very beginning of the play is overwhelmed with the news of the death of Laxmi. The word death proves itself a misnomer for the deliberate suicide of the tortured and tormented lady by her in-laws for extorting more and more money and consumer goods from her parental home. The play reveals how the gendered subaltern passively bears the tyrannical attitudes of the society in the form of oppression exercised by her father and brother before marriage in the name of protecting the 'izzat' or 'aabru' of the family and after marriage the jibes and taunts of in-laws in case of failing to gratify their mammoth demands. She is treated as 'object' without being perceived as a subject. The dramatist, with this sensitive issue of bride-burning, questions the different institutions of society which are held responsible for its smooth running.

The present social issue that is burning a bride is clearly related to Indian society which may be termed as a negative metaphor of our nativist's culture. In this way the play appears to be a strong disapproval of colonial hangover. The play which unravels the story of a lower middle class Gujarati family is not all about this particular family rather it is a prelude to a meaningful and larger narrative lying outside the closed spaces of the Desai's tenement room, Sanjay's living room, Vinod's office, Tarla's kitchen, Roy's apartment and Laxmi in-laws' living cum dining room. 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 the victim Laxmi, tries her level best to dig out the truth behind her sister's suicide but she gets help neither from her family members, especially her brother Anil, nor from society in general which is constituted of Laxmi's friend Tarla, Malini's boyfriend Sanjay. Though she succeeds in baring the naked truth, she fails to bring justice to her dead sister and pacify her discontented soul. Laxmi from the beginning of her life is a tormented soul who 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, despite being affluent begin to 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 tales of countless Indian women whose sufferings strike the playwright's sensitivity and she feels compelled to look at the domestic violence in a broader perspective. It is our patriarchal social setup which has marginalized woman to fit into the category of 'subaltern'. A woman's social position is determined by her relationship to men. Sexism is the ideology that justifies the power of men over women. The extent to which women believe in the precepts of sexist ideology is only a reflection of the powers of coercion and social control. Gender reflections in our society are so pervasive that most of us are not even aware of

their manifestations. Social scientists have questioned the stereotyped assumptions of women's roles and the ways in which gender relations are structured in society.

Marx and Engels regarded the oppression of women as related to the emergence of private property. Engels is of the opinion that the first class opposition coincided with the development of opposition between man and woman in monogamous marriage. From the very beginning monogamy was only for women. The significant characteristic of monogamous marriage was its transformation of the nuclear family into the basic economic unit of society, within which a woman and her children became dependent upon an individual man. Arising in conjugation with exploitative class relations, this transformation resulted in the oppression of women in various forms that has persisted even today. The play highlights society's response to the issue of bride-burning through silence which permeates each and every stratum of society.

Malini, the inconsolable sister of Laxmi puts an effort to bring justice to her dead sister but the responses of Anil, her brother and others make it clear how the society would like to wear the garb of silence after of inhuman act of bride-burning has been committed. This is clear from Anil's statement: "Come on Malu. She is gone now. Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress. Malini: But not beyond retribution"(Mehta: 18). Even her so-called lover Sanjay, the business magnate also suggests the same. "Sanjay: I told you, these things are best forgotten. Be reasonable, Malu" (Mehta 51).

The relationship between man-woman has also been reflected in this play. Malini is involved in a physical relationship with Sanjay and hopes to marry him. But her hopes are shattered with the chilling remarks of Sanjay in which he tells her that considering his father's advanced age he will have to marry a girl which his family approves of. Sanjay's relationship with Malini brings to the surface the very fact that how a woman serves male's dreams and aspirations and if she fails to fulfill it she becomes a target of contempt and criticism. Sanjay: "Why

did you? You usually tell him you're spending the night at a girlfriend's. Have you suddenly decided to embrace sanyas?"(Mehta :41) The common man's disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the Indian legal system is also exposed through Malini, who loses her temper when she comes to know that the law too has proved Laxmi's suicide is an accident. "Malini: I spit on your law courts! Playthings in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor" (Mehta: 18). It is because of the influences of the rich, the poor don't get justice which is suggested through the example of cases of arson against Harijan which don't reach the premises of law courts.

The subjugation of women in another way is also suggested through the portrayal of Malini who gets frustrated from everything whatever comes in her way. Her relationship with her family members including her failure to bring justice to her dead sister as well as her failure in love with Sanjay culminating in separation. In her frustration she gets attracted towards Roy and his idea of radical revolution in society. He, who is an extremist, leads an aggrieved and politicized group of unemployed ex-students encourages and assures Malini for bringing an improbable Utopian revolution. She endorses the ideology of Roy and even keeps illegal guns in her trunks and is even willing to accompany Roy in his secret mission, but very soon realizes that she is exchanging one servitude for another, and decides to stay back and educate herself. She makes it clear in her dignified statement: "I see now that if I follow you, I only exchange one servitude for another. The boot in the face for a place, in the kitchen. Brides will not stop burning when you take over the world, Roy. All I can learn from you are new dishonesties, so GO" (Mehta: 94).

Burning one to death is one of the most painful ways of ending one's life. By choosing such an agonizing form of death a woman seems to be making a statement that death by roasting herself alive seems preferable to daily torments and torture inflicted on her in her husband's homes. The dramatist also

draws the attention of society towards the loopholes in our judiciary system and the corruption prevalent in Police department. She implicitly suggests that a criminalized Police establishment often refuses to even register an honest First Information Report (FIR) while actively destroying evidence of crime. Getting justice through the slow, inefficient and often corrupt judicial institution seems a remote prospect. In most cases of unnatural deaths of young brides, the pattern is pretty much the same. Even when there is clear evidence that the concerned woman has been murdered, the police would invariably register a case of suicide or accident. The basic cause of domestic violence is the uncontrolled dowry system.

Thus, the narrative brings about an acute awareness of the crude social stigma entrenched in Indian psyche. We often perceive a work of art in terms of colonial or postcolonial perspective. The dramatist here assumes the responsibility of decolonizing the stage thematically by adhering to one of the most horrifying aspect of married life deeply rooted in Indian context. The particular enactment of burning a bride has almost become an archetypal icon of woman's tortured lives in Indian society. Certainly the play is far from being just fictional and theatrical. To avoid exploitation there is only way i.e. women literacy, though it is gradually increasing, the female literacy rate in India is less than the male literacy rate. Far fewer girls than boys are enrolled in school, and many girls drop out. In urban India, girls are nearly on a par with boys in terms of education. However, in rural India girls continue to be less well-educated than boys. According to the National Sample Survey Data of 1997, only the states of Kerala and Mizoram have approached universal female literacy. According to scholars, the major factor behind improvements in the social and economic status of women in Kerala is literacy.

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