

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

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## **Politics of Dowry Deaths in India: A Study of Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning***

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**Abstract:** In Indian socio-economical milieu, the incident of 'bride burning' as well as 'dowry death' is a vicious violence which degrades the position of Indian daughterhood into a perilous situation. Dowry is a transfer of property from bride's family to that of the bridegroom, at the time of marriage. In ancient Indian religious scripts, the mention of '*stree dhana*' proves that it is a traditional custom in matrimony. An overview of Indian feminist movement clarifies the fact that, it is only in the last half of 80s when the concept of bride burning or dowry death as a social crime drew the public attention. The campaign against dowry murders in Delhi in 1979, the first time dowry deaths, hitherto regarded as suicide, were dubbed as 'murder'. Terminologically, dowry deaths refer to the deaths of young brides who were being harassed by their in-laws for more dowries, perhaps better known as 'bride burning'. The upsurge marital violence against women due to dowry has already crossed the demarcation and transforms the marital family into a danger zone. But irony lays in the fact that the most of the cases are unrecorded and so, no question of punishment. The socio-spatial strategies of both natal and conjugal families of the wretched daughter carry the same responsibility for this tragedy. Thus, concurrently dowry death not only exemplifies as domestic violence but also reflects the filthy power politics of patriarchy.

The present paper intends to analyze Dina Mehta's prize winning play "*Brides Are Not for Burning*" from the perspective of "bride burning" and its dire consequences. It projects the vivid scenario of the Indian society where women are nothing but a sack of dowry.

**Key-words:** *Dowry death, Stree Dhana, Feminist movement, Power politics, Patriarchy.*

In Indian marriage culture, the practice of dowry is prevalent custom from prehistoric time of Vedic age. The scriptural dowry culture of the Hindu mythology popularly known as *streedhan*, subtly narrates the process of transaction during the wedding of daughter under the musk of criminality and power politics. Dowry serves as the foundation on which explanations for discrimination against women have been built. It conceptualizes the various analytical aspects: colonialists stress on the cultural roots in a benighted Hinduism; Marxist observations certify it as an economic institution while feminists describe it as a tool of gender discrimination. The very opinion of Manu not only enhances the disinheritance of daughter from her parental property but also perpetuates the disempowerment of women. Thus, this system not only jeopardizes the marital life of a girl but also provokes the would-be parents to commit the heinous crime of female feticide. The obsession for boy child is not any intentional human perversion; rather it's an unspoken compulsion on parents to get rid off from the burden of dowry in case of female child. Thus, "dowry makes daughters 'burdensome' only because daughters are unwanted to begin with." (Kishwar 8).

The upsurge violence against women including dowry deaths and abortion of female foetus have become attribute to the economic burden that a daughter is said to represent. A

daughter is a subject of vulnerability both in her natal and marital households; none can escape the responsibility of felony related to the dowry death of that wretched girl. Actually the system of dowry is to some extent a rotational hierarchical vengeance for regulating the power structure in family. Existing dowry system though a resultant of patriarchal society but its historical, socio-cultural and psychological factors cannot be ignored. Minute observations of these causes establish the practice as an institutionalized social means for continuing the oppression of women. Feminist research on dowry and its related violence enables to flag out the sociological impingement of this ongoing butchery upon womenfolk of our country. Hence, problems created through this transaction is no more a mere familial trouble, but it's a phenomenological politics to devalue the female.

Dowry is a transfer of property from the bride's family to that of the bridegroom, at the time of marriage (Negi 14). According to the present practice, dowry usually subsumes material gifts and cash paid to the bridegroom and his kin. This practice continues even after marriage. Dowry given at the time of marriage is not only the transaction as far as the marriage is concerned (Negi 16). The given dowry is generally considered as woman's property and she has entire control upon it. In order to strengthen her financial position in marital home and to act as insurance in the event that the marriage may end for any reason, dowry is presented. But currently, it appears to compensate the financial burden that her existence places on in-laws at and during the marriage. So, within time, the sense and meaning of dowry gradually relegates from the *kanyaadaan dakshina* to a forceful bargaining in wedding. Generally dowry is the alternative means to give some paternal property to daughter as she has no right to inherit father's possessions after marriage while the son will be the automatic owner of this property. Actually, this system of disinheritance of daughter from her father's belongings increases the demand of dowry.

The explanations for continuing the dowry system as found in literature have to do with socio-cultural, religious and economical factors. In Indian culture most of the bridal families have the intention to elevate the social standard by marrying the daughter into a well established financially secure family. So, to fulfill these criteria, parents usually prepare themselves in sponsoring a colossal amount for dowry. The groom families take up the advantage of this situation to make more money through this business of "*subho vivah*". As a consequence of this, women from lower income families end up with unsatisfactory conjugal mates or sometimes have to remain single. Comparatively, the less educated but rich brides by dint of their parental strong monetary competence, get married into well-to-do family. So, the cause of gender discrimination and unequal marriage in our society originates from the distribution of unequal property and its accumulation into some money-minded people which ultimately culminates into a malfunction of dowry through the institutionalization of matrimony. That's why parents prefer to welcome boy child instead of girl as while a girl raises at parental home and later gifted away with huge dowry, a boy in contrast may assure of economical support not only through his job, but through dowry money also. Again Indian mindset about divorcee or single woman is too stringent for her healthy living in society that only wedding is that avenue to get rid of this schism. Though Indian civil law makes provisions for divorce but the socio-cultural upbringing and entrenched belief upon it strongly discourages the divorce. Therefore, the practice of dowry and its inadequacy operate the violence machinery smoothly. In addition to this, most of the Indian brides are little educated and preferably to play the role of perfect housewives which confines their knowledge and lessen their scope to financial support of family. Their limited access to reproductivity and unpaid domestic chores make them nugatory. Thus the only focus is in dowry. In this respect, we may say that girls are nothing but the sack of dowry.

But the system of both giving and taking dowry is a kind of social crime. The dowry prohibition act 1961 was amended in 1984, 1985, and 1986. This act also articulates that in cases where the marriage breaks down, dowry payments must be returned. Though all people practicing the dowry system are not at all involved in domestic violence but the link between two is complementary. When random demands fail to gratify the greed of in-laws of daughter, it precipitates serious consequence. Domestic violence including physical and emotional torture is the common outcome of this ungratified avarice which culminates into dowry death of bride. Dowry deaths constitute a special category of death that was for the first time defined in a section introduced into the Indian Penal Code. In 1986, section 304 (b) stipulates that death of a woman within seven years of her marriage by burns or bodily injury with evidence of cruelty or harassment by her husbands or his relatives in connection with a demand for dowry is 'dowry death' and punishable with imprisonment for not less than seven years.

In Indian socio-economical milieu, the incident of 'bride burning' as well as 'dowry death' is a vicious violence which put the position of Indian daughterhood into a perilous situation. An overview of Indian feminist movement clarifies the fact that, it is only in the last half of 80s when the concept of bride burning or dowry death as a social crime drew the public attention. The campaign against dowry murders started in Delhi in 1979, and was the first time that dowry deaths, hitherto regarded as suicide, were dubbed as 'murder'. In general term dowry deaths refer to the deaths of young brides who were being harassed by their in-laws for more dowries, perhaps better known as 'bride burning'. Dowry related violence against married women by the families they marry into, is a phenomenon that is on increase in the country. But the irony is that the most of the cases are not recorded and the punishment for the crime is not awarded to the marital family. A daily glance of newspaper is the ample proof for the leaps and bound increasing of the fact. The controversial murder case of Devyani Banik of the late 80s in Bengal was a heart-rending one which raises many questions about the safety, survive and security in the marital status of the girl. Thus, the dowry death in the form of domestic violence is a burning issue of the society.

However, the question arises that what provokes the in-laws to 'murder' their bride or what makes the new bride to take such extreme decision of commit suicide. Unlike dowry, the cause of dowry deaths deals with the multiple explanations of feminist and psychological perspectives of perpetrators. While dowry is a cultural practice, violence is inhumanity. Feminists theorize violence as a consequence of social roles of newly married couples and the legitimized social norms of male domination of resources, institutionalized gender inequalities and consequential perceived male entitlement to manipulating the lives of women. In Indian context, the most important factor in dowry violence is that both victim and abuser are related to each other through the relationships to a man. So, a subtle conflict of controlling the power upon the male in form of wife and mother is going on. Again, as Indian women elevate to the acme of power in terms of their spousal economic standard, so the endorsement of women's sexual role to husband and child rearing capacity scaling measurement for the distribution of power in households. Hence, the participation in violent activities of mother-in-law by dint of her seniority within the authoritative structure stems from the interaction of gender and life-cycle based hierarchies. After the advent of newly married bride in her son's life, ma-in-law turns off due to financial and emotional insecurity and slipping away of decision making power which gradually drag her to go against the bride. Indian psychologist Sudhir Kakar points out the low self-esteem of women in patriarchal society as a chief cause of this violence.

Again, the strategy of learned helplessness from the entrenched belief encourages the abuser to take advantage of lingering the violence. An oppressive system of women's past experience or imposed belief causes them to succumb to the abuse than fight against them. Woman's economical and emotional dependence along with maternal attachment hold back her to continue the abusive relationship. Even parents of woman convince her to cope up with the abusive plight for avoiding the social stigmatization. So the battered wife has no option apart from staying with her offensive marital family. The marginalization of women's economic rights as well as their disinheritance from paternal property thus paralyzes them forever.

The feminist as well as theatrical intervention in articulating the fact of dowry and bride burning first time draws public attention in 1979 in Delhi. Feminist activists try to spot not only the reasons of such severe crime but also provide support through free counseling, giving shelter to battered wife, campaigning against domestic violence, and seek out nonviolent solutions to family conflict. Theatre practitioners utilize the device of street theatre to protest against the dowry deaths. Theatre academician Richa Nagar's examination on Vanangana's street theatre campaign advocates against domestic violence in Chitrakoot area which features of how the venom of domestic violence intricate the lives of women and try to paralyze their empowerment. Activists of this organization focus upon dowry deaths of nearby villages which ultimately creates a political understanding in women. The grassroots workers are chiefly 'women-only' group who promotes people against domestic abuse by conducting feminist street theatre in order to reshape the agenda of organization. Their performance of the play *Mujhe Jawab Do!* conceptualize the notion of how public-private turns into spatialized and politicized through campaign. It deals with the domestic issues of kinship, marriage and women's exploitation in marital family. Generally their attempt is to highlight the fact that criminal indulgence of dowry murder involves the family, the kinsman and the community: no one escapes the responsibility of a daughter's death. The bride price is nothing but a commodification of women. The socio-spatial strategy of natal and conjugal family in occurring of dowry death implies women's lack of access to resources and their devaluation inside the household and their subordination also. Thus, feminist activists and theatre practitioners attempt to sensitize the public about the severity of dowry and its result through women drama.

In Indian women dramaturgy, Dina Mehta's prize-winning play *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a documentary one which highlights the major social evil like dowry death and its dire consequences. Mehta tries to project the vivid scenario of the Indian society where women are nothing but a sack of dowry. This drama is a clear hint to the audience about the multi dimensional women related problems of our society. The audience-reader can observe all these social malice through the telescopic view of Mehta's mouthpiece Malini Desai alias Malu, the 'angry young woman' of the drama. Throughout the play, she finds out the 'secret' behind her sister Lakshmi's death which ajar the socio-cultural politics responsible for this tragedy. The patriarchal cultural taboos compel daughter to sacrifice herself at the altar of avarice.

The unnatural demise of Lakshmi unbolts the multidimensional lacunas of society. Her death is not merely an accident; rather her tragic departure politicizes the fact of a daughter's life puts on auction. Right from the beginning, audience can notice the parental and marital conspiracy behind her death. The very setting of the play displays prominently the difference between haves and have not. The acting areas the Desai tenement (1) and Tarla's kitchen (4) are comparatively bare and lower-middle class settings while the rest

areas like Sanjay's living room (2), Vinod's office (3) and the In-Laws living room (5) exhibit affluence. Thus, audience can guess the material distinction of two families which ultimately culminates through the death of Lakshmi. At marriage ceremony, her in-laws humiliate her father very harshly. But like a perpetual father, he swallows the insult to smoothen his daughter's life without making any protest against it. "Since one of the key determinants of the dowry payment amount is the perceived economic status of the groom's family, families which seek upward mobility through marriage alliances are usually the ones who pay more exorbitant dowries." (Kishwar 14). Thus by following the customary belief, Mr. Desai did his best: "Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of silk... Their expectations were endless because they imagined a government clerk makes so much on the side. They thought I had feathered my nest with bribes and kickbacks... And I let them think that because I wanted to do my best by Laxmi!" (13). Hence, her father cannot get away the responsibility of tragedy. If Mr. Desai could free himself from the convention of huge dowry payment in order to enhance his social status through his daughter's marriage and in lieu of, if he could seek a groom of equal social position, maybe his daughter will survive. To eradicate the dowry system and stop bride burning, the natal family also should take step as giving dowry is also same allegation. So, the process should be start from father's side to put an end of this social evil. Probably Mehta intentionally mentions the acting areas to indicate the differential economical background between Desai and Marfatia family which not only points out the consumerism but also set the mood for grim reality of dowry murder. Therefore, her dramaturgic insight highlights the dire consequence of dowry which actually has its root in the unequal division of monetary power.

Secondly, the erroneous family planning of the Desai household contributes enough significance for Laxmi's death. Due to futile attempt of fathering through his first wife Sujata, he abandons her after six miscarriages within ten years. Laxmi, Anil and Malu are the offspring from his second marriage who "were all born in the first five years of marriage." (14). But he never thinks about the future of it. His unbridled libido, excessive desire for children, "endless breeding and spawning" (17) recasts him as "monsters of fecundity" (42). In respect of his clerical job and salary, it was impossible for him to provide privileged circumstances for three children. Even, he was unable to educate Laxmi properly "because with mother always pregnant and ailing, she had to baby-sit for us!" (17). He had no sense of restriction on childbirth and maybe unaware of contraceptives. His thinking of compensate of Laxmi's little education with that of dowry elements proves wrong as education cannot be a substitute for money. So, as a father, he unconsciously turns into a villain for his children. And Laxmi is the victim of this fatherly butchery. A 2011 Pakistani movie *Bol* expostulates on this very fact of prodigality of fathering countless children.

Again another most important cause of Laxmi's death is of course the inadequate dowry she brought at wedding. "They tormented and humiliated her because the dowry she brought them was not what they had angled for" (16) though the Marfatia family didn't claim dowry. So the politics is very prominent behind the scheme: while the marital family would not directly ask for dowry then the natal should be prepared to fill the sack of dowry now and then. But unfortunately, like the urbanized so called protestant, the Marfatia family practices the same at their own. "Not a day went but her mother-in-law taunted Laxmi that father had not honoured all his promises. And two sisters-in-law took up the chant that a goddess of wealth had entered their home with clothes fit for a servant and jewels not worth the name." (16). Mr. Desai actually forgets the popular formula of avarice: rich wants to be more opulence, their demands are never ending.

The greediness of Marfatia family seems so irrepressible that they even insure their bride Laxmi for any unnatural accident. Laxmi herself told it to her sister Malu. After her accidental death by burning, this point comes to notice that she was insured by eighty thousand rupees. There lies a subtle politics under this fact: insurance company will compensate for this unnatural cold blooded murder by refunding the insured money to her husband Vinod. In order to get a clean chit for this process, the marital 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 eyewitness from own clan including Vinod himself, ma-in-law, Arjun, their paid servant Kalu and the neighbor Tarla to whom they fix a settlement with her jobless husband in lieu of her reticence in court. Thus the plan is clear to audience. They hire the law by dint of their money. Even, Anil, Laxmi's brother was also offered to get the 10% money as 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.

Though the socio-cultural and financial reasons of Laxmi's dowry death are strong enough to get the alibi of her suicidal motive but the psychological factor behind it should not be ignored. In Indian household marriage of a daughter announces her official arrival into husband's family which is generally controlling by his mother. The same kitchen has to be shared by two ladies from different backgrounds. Even, they have to share the affection of same person. The sexist patriarchal remark "two pairs of breasts will definitely get into a fight". (Sengupta, 93) Due to the marriage, the son now turns into a husband also. So his double role of son as well as husband to different but exclusively own females respectively his mother and wife convolutes the situation in terms of economical and emotional factors. The Marfatia family of *Brides...* faces the same problem: the entry of new bride in Vinod's life may be slacking the mother-son bond though Laxmi was meek and timid. Ma-in-law has tried her best to lessen the intimacy of newly married couples as she is aware of a great secret of her son. So, she tactfully assumes the weapon of insufficient dowry to handle the situation. Her trajectory gives her three opportunities: firstly she could have the omnipotent authority in her home-front, secondly, the secret of her son will be transferred to the bride as accuse; and finally, her son will be able to achieve more handsome dowry in marriage market.

However, apart from all these causes, the chief motive of this dowry murder lies in a health problem of Vinod. After a minute investigation, Malini points out the final crack of the wall. Her interaction with Arjun, provides the most awful news which suddenly come into focus through the argument between Ma and Arjun: "It's the truth! And don't you even slap me again, Ma. That's what he is, your Vinod. Eunuch. He should work in a harem. Why did he play the endless farce of dragging Laxmi bhabhi from one holy man to another? Vinod couldn't father a child if you b-bought him ten wives and pushed him into bed with each one in turn. ... He bosses everyone like a gangster! But you think I don't know the doctors have found him without sp-sperm? You think I don't know about the doctors and the tests and all the medicine he's tried allopathic, ayurvedic, ho-homeopathic"- (81). The in-laws blame Laxmi for being a sterile woman — while doctors have found fault with her husband. Even her father also holds Laxmi responsible for her childlessness. But, Arjun's abusive outspokenness discloses the family clandestine: Vinod is impotent. According to medical terminology, he is Ajustperm. Malini is successful in her mission, she marks out the guilt. It is the common mindset of Indian society where girls are always stigmatized even without any reason. Here, the play *Brides...* has close affinity with the movie *Pahechan: The Face of*

*Truth* starring Ravina Tandon who in the role of a lawyer wins the case on behalf of the natal family as the girl was sentenced to death for enveloping her husband's impotence.

Mother-in-law's incessant false charging of barrenness, penury and fraudulent against Laxmi creates a huge impinge upon her mind. Though this was a daily saga of Laxmi's conjugal life, but on that evening these insulting words instigated her to run to the kitchen and lock herself in. And in her utter desperation she sets herself to fire. The 'holy fire' drives her to the pyre. Vinod and Kalu try to break the door, but Ma said, "Let her finish what she has started inside there..." (80). Hence, Laxmi enlisted in the wretched list of bride burning.

Beginning with a particular problematic issue like 'dowry death', the play gradually encompasses many unexplored agendas of our society. 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.

Mehta's intention behind this play is to highlight the multidimensional causes of dowry death. Through the unnatural death of Laxmi, she wants to point out the savagery and subsequent impact of it on the natal family. The most important issue she raises through her play is that of male engagement in promoting the violence against women. In the play, beside Malini, Anil achieves the credit who plays the role of male promotion against dowry. Though initially passive, but eventually he utters the crux of the play: "That brides are not for burning! Not as a ritual sacrifice on the alter of avarice and greed." (63)

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