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Subdued Echoes of Violence and Terror in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder and Brides Are Not for Burning*

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Abstract:

The asymmetrical dissociation of rights and obligations on the basis of gender which are embedded in intra-household structures of the society leave gaps with scope for abject terror and violence. The women's liberation movement and the various other movements pertaining to the empowerment of women have not been able to achieve the desired motto of an egalitarian society. This study on the plays of Dina Mehta namely *Getting Away with Murder* and *Brides Are Not for Burning* is an attempt to analyze the plays in the light of a study of the tales of violence and subjugation.

Keywords: Violence, Feticide, Abuse, Dowry, Burning, Subjugation, Dishonor.

Despite all great scientific advancement, urbanization and industrialization, violence and the terror that it brings along have nevertheless been co-existing with all developments. In this light, women dramatists of India like Manjula Pdmabhan, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta and Mahasweta Devi have been candid in their revelation of violence in the plays that they have written. With the broad perspective of feminist narration, the plays of Dina Mehta seek to resound the stifled echoes of violence and terror from the closed doors of the households and the cold premises of human relationships. Thus, dexterously juxtaposing the aspects of violence and subjugation, the plays center around the woman who from cradle to grave is terrorized and subjugated at every stage of her life.

Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* goes a long way to address issues of child abuse, its associated trauma, rape, female feticide, blind superstitious belief that is guilty of deterring human progressive development, but acts as the silent demon eating away the very fabric of humanity in the Indian society. This play reminds the strong modern woman with an independent understanding of the self and the world around her to rise up to the situations that are utmost taxing her conscience, happiness and harmony.

The play was first performed by Indus International, a socio-cultural group for women at British Council Theatre in Mumbai in 1990. It quite subtly through revelation, affirmation and recognition seeks to portray the lives of three friends Mallika, Sonali and Raziya. The chord that connects the three friends is perhaps the strain of suffering at the hands of the chauvinistic male hypocrisy. The private world of each is steeped in innumerable body blows, as they have had to face childhood sexual abuse, differential treatment meted out to the male and the female child, infidelity from the end of their partners with whom they have an utterly insecure relationship, sexual harassment at workplace and elsewhere, and a disheveled life despite having been educated. Drawn in the ideals

of revelation of the extreme dishonor that these women undergo, the play in two acts seeks to paint the picture of life returning to the phase of calm after all storm and thunder, a movement inspired by the women who recognize their own selves to restore the calmness in their own lives.

Dina Mehta in this play takes up the burning issues of childhood sexual abuse and the associated trauma that carries on its traces to adulthood. Sonali was sexually abused as a child, she grows up with the trauma still existing in her mind and the experience not in the least forgotten to the present though she is now happily married to a prospering businessman Anil Bhatnagar. She is in the third month of pregnancy but has not yet informed her husband about this, she wants her friend Mallika to ask Dr. Raziya to perform amniocentesis on her so as to find out the sex of the unborn child. According to Sonali if Malu could persuade Dr. Raziya, the doctor could perhaps show some medical pretexts and do the test. Now, it is known that amniocentesis is banned for sex determination, it's to be done only to detect abnormalities in the foetus. Sonali believes that all that is required is a son, a "queue of superfluous daughters" therefore would be undesirable. "Anil would cheerfully welcome a row of daughters" (Mehta, *Getting Away* 63), despite this she is persistent on knowing the sex of the child. The conversation between Sonali and Malu goes in this manner:

SONALI: Call it what you like. It is still my body and my choice. A symbol of my emancipation.

MALU: What is? Female feticide? My God, this is like something out of a black comedy. Mothers award the death sentence to their unborn daughters in the name of liberation. They thereby prove their woman-power! Their omnipotence! They play God!

SONALI: Shut up, shut up! (Thumping the table) To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude! I know, I know! (*Getting Away* 63)

As a child, Sonali had received a differential treatment from her mother's end for her brother Gopal was born with "an extra set of accessories", so she had to do most of the work. (*Getting Away* 59) Sonali is suffering from psychosis, the abnormal condition of derangement, a mental state often described as involving a "loss of contact with reality". Sonali is constantly troubled with the fear that "someone indoors is watching me". (*Getting Away* 58) Her confession of having seen her mother suffer after her father's death, the differential treatment that she had received at home during her childhood, the sexual abuse that she had been subjected to at the hands of her uncle, all went on to the traumatic experiences being carried on to adulthood, when she started behaving strangely, became irritable, her enacting as a little girl in front of the mirror when she is alone in her room all prove this.

Visual pleasure as dramatic art of Dina Mehta is split between an active male spectacular subject and the passive female spectacular object, whose body comes to signify what Laura Mulvey terms "to be looked-at-ness". In this context, it would be relevant to note that Helene Cixous as well as Antonin Artaud, theatre must effect a "re-conquest of the signs of what exists" stripping them of their characters as signs in order to retrieve their existence, while emphasizing the arbitrary nature of the "sign-ness" in

order to question the social practices and discourses (for instance Freudian and certain varieties of post-Freudian psychoanalysis) supporting the patriarchal family structure that the theatre resorts to reproduce.

Raziya's troubled relationship with her husband can also be seen in the light of atrocity against a woman's private space. Her husband Habib has an affair with his niece Fatima's friend, the nineteen year old Zamana, whom he plans "to marry" (*Getting Away* 77). Raziya has agreed to this arrangement, since she believes that she cannot have a child of her own. When Malu questions Raziya, she says:

"I find an ancient tyranny at work within 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..." (*Getting Away* 77).

According to Raziya, "by identifying Man as the villain, we have won our fight for equality. The enemy is within.... *It is in our minds, Mallika, that we are underlings*". (*Getting Away* 78)

On the other hand, there is Mallika whose plight is no better. She works with Mr. Pinglay who is a male chauvinist and limits Mallika to secretarial work all along, even fixing up her lunch with clients without her consent. The truth however is that it's Mallika who is there on the front line, getting all the business and running the entire office. Mr. Pinglay resorts to sexually harassing Malu's secretary Thelma, blackmailing her with the three phone calls that she had made some time back. In Thelma's words, "he – he makes vulgar talk... and wicked gestures... asking me to accompany him to hotels outside the city" (*Getting Away* 70).

Talking of Mallika's ambiguous relationship with Sonali's brother Gopal, who plays the irresponsible lover, she has come to compromise with his odd ways, as she says herself, "If I call so late, I might find another woman with him", (*Getting Away* 73) and again, "Whenever he cheats on me it takes him a week to get over his guilt" (*Getting Away* 73). Gopal is involved with the upliftment of women by fighting against the practice of women being burnt in rural areas under the allegation that they are witches. He even undertakes the care of Minzari's little daughter, after Minzari is beaten to death. However, it is still left to the reader to ponder if Gopal really meant to play the absolute philanthropist in this case, given the facts that Gopal was given to infidelity and cheating, and there are hints that indicate that he had an illicit relationship with Minzari. Towards the end of his conversation with Mallika when she goes to his apartment, Gopal says, "What do you want me to say? That I screw every woman I meet because I'm sick and tired of an old hag like you..." (*Getting Away* 84)

Dina Mehta deftly uses the theatrical representations of portraying resistance against the perpetrating violence that has become the order of the day in the andro-centric world. She has dealt with issues that remain concealed in the urban milieu of sham, hypocrisy

and falsehood that conspires against the life of an unborn child, invests upon the mother to choose the gender of her child, empowers her to stoop so low as to take away the life of the female child, discriminate against the female child during the years that she grows up, and even when she grows up, the inhuman world leaves no stone unturned to push her into the perishing fires of anguish through eve-teasing, subjugation, suppression, rape, sexual harassment and other forms of violence subjecting her to the utter violation of her private space.

The roots of violence lie in the dark psyche of the exaggerated patriarchal order of the world, the minds of men that have obliterated to the disadvantage of the women, wherein rage, frustration, power and the ability to control and exploit plays the greatest role in stimulating violence, which may have triggered the teaser and stalker who tries to befriend Mallika in the very beginning of the play. Then again, in Sonali's uncle we find the pedophilic man who abuses the little girl. A similar mental framework is possessed by Habib, Raziya's unfaithful husband given to an extra-marital affair and on plans of a second marriage with a very young girl, which Raziya has wholeheartedly accepted because she cannot have a child.

Women in India have been held in dishonor for long, several reasons having deliberately contributed to this which include the emergence of the concept of wealth in the patriarchal system, the change in outlook about family structure, the wrong and superstitious belief about seeking salvation only through a son, urbanization and industrialization that has brought about consumerism on a large scale and an avid influence of the adverse side of the Western civilization. There is no apparent end to the trauma of being born a woman, from cradle to the grave she stands incessant oppression at the hands of the chauvinist male who fears that power if it's in the hands of the female, the driving energetic force can shake the pillars of corruption and violence.

Brides Are Not for Burning is another play by Dina Mehta which as the very title implies presents an account of a theatrical presentation of violence against women victimized by the dowry system. Mehta dedicates this play to "All the angry young women Who can be whatever they choose to be" (Mehta, *Brides* 1). The play won the first prize in a worldwide playwrighting competition sponsored by the BBC in 1979, and was broadcast from London on their World Service and later by All India Radio. The play begins in the Desai tenement room, with the news of the death of the bride Laxmi, who has been apparently pushed into suicidal flames by her husband and in-laws. What follows is a quest for existence and identity for the bride's sister, Malini, the protagonist of the play, torn between youthful idealistic fancies, revolutionary ideas of the anarchist Roy Mukherjee and material pursuits with her lover Sanjay. With the anguish of her sister's painful death buried deep inside her, she seeks to fight for she believes Laxmi is not beyond retribution. *Brides Are Not for Burning* questions and points a finger at the prevalent patriarchal order and assumptions that thrust subservient roles on women. The play at the same time addresses the questions of dichotomy between appearance and reality, truth and falsehood and real and surreal woven intricately in the complex web of issues like unemployed and misguided youth, the missionary agencies spreading undue fanaticism and the ever emerging greed for money and material possessions.

The life of the deceased bride Laxmi presents the pitiable spectacle of the plight of most Indian girls hailing from a middle class background. She had been denied schooling and proper education even though Malini admits her to be “the brightest” of them all. (*Brides* 17) She has had to baby sit for them all because their mother was always pregnant and ailing. She was married off to an impotent man Vinod and after five years of marriage, she is reduced to a menial cook doing all the heavy work until she is actually left to perish to the flames. Anil, Laxmi’s brother is utopian and romantic while Malini, her sister has her convictions firmly rooted in the Marxist paradigm, takes up the drive against the male hegemonic order. In vengeance, Malini is even seen resorting to Roy out of her way by secretly keeping his illegal weapons in her house. Then there are men like Sanjay in the society, whom Malini is deeply in love with, surrendering herself completely to him physically and emotionally but who takes undue advantage of the girl and does not intend to actually ever. On the same side of the scale is Laxmi’s husband, Vinod, who is coward enough not to accept his sterility, takes his wife to one or the other holy men blaming the impotency on her. The truth of the whole play is summed up in the last few words of the play.

ROY: So after all this time you are chickening out on me; you uppity little whore-

MALINI: (with all the force and dignity at her command) 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! (*Brides* 94)

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.

Talking of the aspects of women subjugation and their rising up to the extremely taxing situations to fight back reminds us of Iqbal Bano’s very popular gazal *Hum Dekhenge*. The lines from the translated version of the song that almost seem to echo in Dina Mehta’s plays are:

“We will see
It is certain that we too will see
We will see

That day which has been promised

Which has been written in the divine tablet

We will see

When the cruel mountains of injustice
Will blow away like cotton-wool
Beneath the feet of us oppressed
The earth's heartbeat will pound
And above the heads of the rulers
The lightening will crackle..."

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