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Recalcitrance in *Getting Away With Murder*

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Abstract:

From the beginning of time, roles of women have been defined and confined by the female cycle. The problem is that a woman is always identified as a mother and somebody's wife and never being herself. The men have always had an upper hand in creating rules for women. Dina Mehta's play *Getting Away with Murder* deals with both overt and covert violence against women giving rise to a big question – What does it mean to be a woman in such a society? It is the nature of woman on which are founded all questions of her status and changes herein. Resistance transforms the structure of power assumed within the modern society's discourse by recognizing and nurturing an order in which the relationship between self and other is one of mutual interdependence rather than antipathy. The paper studies the resistance and forms in the play.

Keywords: empowerment, resistance, society, violence, women

Dina Mehta, a widely acclaimed playwright, has contributed to the development of English Drama by dealing with various social issues like child abuse, rape, superstition, female feticide, sterility, exploitation of women at workplace and in society. The literature in English has evolved over the last few decades. New subjects have come into forefront. Mehta's plays scripted in 1980's make the reader introspect the present state of affairs in the Indian society. This paper assesses resistance from women characters of the play in various forms and differs in terms of empowerment of protagonists.

The condition of women is a result of patriarchal system. From the beginning of time, roles of women have been defined and confined by the female cycle. The problem is that a woman is always identified as a mother and somebody's wife and never being herself. The men have always had an upper hand in creating rules for women. They are exploited and oppressed so that role and position of men in society remains unquestioned and unchallenged. Kate Millett insists that the roots of women's oppression are deeply buried in gender system of patriarchy. Neeru Tandon in her book *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* has quoted Kate Millet from her book *Sexual Politics* that "women will be liberated only when gender discrimination is eliminated as it is

constructed and fostered by patriarchy . . . All other forms of oppression stem from male dominance. The purpose of this oppression is to obtain psychological ego satisfaction, and strength and self-esteem.” (Tandon, 44)

Oral lores have been found in Indian culture to dominate the thoughts and patterns of life whether in urban or in rural areas. There are binary opposites in terms of class background, geographical location (professional women in cities, peasant women in the country, literate and illiterate, rich and poor) and so on. And even educated are not free of these vices. The situation can change only when the women speak out and tell their stories. In many myths and sagas or religious stories women are presented as helpless victims of crimes for which they are not accounted for and not only they bear the brunt of the torture due to the failures of their kith and kins, but also remain silent before the patriarchal aggression. Draupadi had to bear the brunt of her husband’s failure. He had staked all and he lost Draupadi because she was a ‘possession’. Dushasaan, as the name suggests, tried his best to unclothe her in the assembly but only Krishna’s miracle saved her. The question is who created these myths which have to be clearly observed by the women who are doubly oppressed. The word ‘*doubly*’ accentuates her poverty and then the denial of dignified survival. In our society we do not expect miracles. The women will have to take cudgels for themselves. The recalcitrance has to be from the women. A woman’s achievements speak of her own determination and will power. Yet, majority of women fail to achieve the liberation due to their inability to escape from the traditional feminine world.

Resistance transforms the structure of power assumed within the modern society’s discourse by recognizing and nurturing an order in which the relationship between self and other is one of mutual interdependence rather than antipathy. Violence against women can be in any form as also stated on the back cover of the book *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*:

Women face violence in many aspects of their daily lives, from total strangers on the street who view them as sexual objects, from members of the family, from society which assigns them a status lower than men. This violence is multifaceted: not merely physical, it is more often mental and emotional, subtle and indirect, often insidious and hard to recognise, presented as it usually is, in the guise of respect, idealization, concern, protectiveness or passion. The effects of violence on a woman’s psyche are deeply complex, hard to understand and even more difficult to overcome.(Poile Sengupta, Back Cover)

There are laws to support the women yet in practice they continue to suffer discrimination, harassment and humiliation at the hand of law enforcing agencies. The agencies have men working for them who have grown up within the patriarchal system and cannot look beyond their nose. But then a big question arises – What does it mean to be a woman in such a society? It is the nature of woman on which are founded all questions of her status and changes

herein. For this understanding it is necessary to know the ideologies and movements in which a woman insists to seek her true nature and destiny, and finds contemporary expression. Wollstonecraft believed that both sexes contributed to the inequalities and took it for granted that women had considerable power over men, but both would require education to ensure the necessary changes in social attitudes. However her belief that education is the key to stop women oppression does not hold true for the Indian society which is riddled with vices.

Dina Mehta's play *Getting Away with Murder* deals with both overt and covert violence against women. The reader is able to connect with Dina Mehta's characters of Mallika, Sonali and Dr. Raziya without overlooking Thelma and the widowed women from the village. Where the first four characters can be identified with the urban ways of life, the latter carries a great burden. The oral lores have transformed in ways to give power to men to incorporate violence towards the women as evident in the play at various levels. The more discourse in human society of modernity, the more the animal instincts project themselves on multiple platforms.

The discriminatory treatment Sonali received from her mother, who always gave preference to her brother, Gopal, had a deep impact on her psych. Moreover she had borne the brunt of child sexual abuse which leads to psychosis. She even mimics the whole incident of her sexual abuse. She is always in a fear that "someone indoor is watching" her (Mehta, 58). She was unwilling to bring daughters into a world where daughters had no safety and no welcome. Her insecurity was to the extent that she got her two female fetuses aborted. This could also be seen as her revolt to the male dominated society. She even justifies her feticide and her attempt of sex detection in her next pregnancy as her right and as a mode of emancipation and reclamation of her own body:

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! (Mehta, 63)

She wants to make the importance of female felt through their absence. She forces us to imagine a world without women. She challenges the patriarchal society by snatching their means of ego satisfaction i.e women. "Escape" is a form of resistance which Ashcroft conceptualizes in the idea of saying 'No'. Sonali's escape from giving birth to a girl child does not alter the political structure that has reinforced the patriarchal society. Her move from traditional 'gender constraint' is an alteration in subject position but not an escape from patriarchy. The structure is left unchallenged and continues to shape and limit in different ways.

The oppression women face directly affects their psychology. According to Freud abnormal repression or neurotic behaviour leads to behavior that is illogical, self-destructive, or anti-social. (Freud, 41-44, 55-56) The repression of psychological trauma in adults who have been a victim of child abuse result in psychic numbing, blocking out of memories or remembering about the catastrophe leads to sensations which may also cause distortion of personality. (Freud,56) The same is the case with Sonali. Her uncle, *Narottam*, which ironically means 'the best among men', took advantage of his sister's minor daughter almost every night. The widowed sister turned a blind eye to it. She was at the mercy of her brother to provide for herself and her children, so she let the oppressor rule to his heart's content without considering the repercussions young Sonali may have to face. But Sonali rose against the oppressor in leading him to his death. This defiance that we come across in the play is a form of defense or resistance to being oppressed.

But it is not that all the males commit violence against females. Sonali's husband, Anil Bhatnagar and her brother, Gopal are examples of such men who stand up for the help and rights of women. It is only with their help that Sonali is able to overcome her nightmares associated with her sexual abuse. Gopal is sensitive to her and even comes out with the truth about her sexual abuse during childhood.

I guess there is no . . . less brutal way of saying that my sister was sexually abused . . . from the time she was 8 years old . . . Uncle Narotam So you can imagine . . . night after night . . . coming to her bed, the pious swine . . . He . . . threatened her into silence . . . and submission . . . the screams she swallowed must be still tearing her up inside . . . And I did nothing to help her, nothing. . . . hiding my face in the bedcovers . . . I was in the same room and did nothing. (Mehta, 87-88)

Anil overlooked his mother's information regarding Sonali's behaviour. He loved her enough to share her nightmares and bring her out from her traumatic state of mind and willful acceptance of third pregnancy. Sonali, once secure in her husband's love calls her mother-in-law from Varanasi to care for the newborn. She is even able to speak and overcome her fear. She says: "Nothing can change overnight, I guess, but we can be goddesses if we want it enough...." (92). There is a note of positivity where she visualizes a bright future. Women with man and woman with woman relations in this part end with an end to oppression. Rather than the oppressors the male here are the upholders of woman's dignity.

Gopal, a photographer by profession also worked for the improvement of condition of women by fighting against the practice of women being burnt in rural areas under the allegation that they are witches. He goes to a village in Jharkhand and comes across a lot of weird malpractices in the name of religious ceremonies. The oppressors are the powerful men of the village. The widows of the village, if in possession of a piece of land or if they disobey the will

of powerful men are driven to practices which drive them to their death. This is double oppression of women. Three eerie stories, which were captured by Gopal in his camera, have been woven into the play throwing light on this aspect of patriarchal society. Patriarchy functions differently in different spaces and it is experienced within the emergence of modern and capitalist relations of power and identity as it is within the 'traditional' culture.

The first picture is of Indumati, a widow in Ranchi, who was smeared with muck and the mob was chasing her towards the river to throw her in but was saved in the nick of time by Gopal. The other picture is about a woman whose face was blackened, head shaved and she was stripped naked in front of the police station and men hounded her with burning brands and sticks which led her to her death. This lady had repulsed the attention of the local priest and once she became a widow, the *pujari* claimed that she was a witch and had eaten her husband! Third picture is of Minzari and her three year old daughter who was in danger of being killed because she had inherited her husband's land which was coveted by her brother-in-law. Later Gopal undertakes the care of Minzari's little daughter, after Minzari is beaten to death in Barisola village.

It is very clear from these stories that the ills that prevail are prompted by lust, caste tensions, greed for land etc. by the men, who want to prove that they are superiors that they can control women the way they like. And in order to prove it they can go to any extent. If any woman tries to revolt against their will she has to face the same consequences as faced by the women in the story. The binary of civilized savage comes to life. This shows the ostracism of the women in areas in India which is riddled with superstition and blatant male dominance by the powerful of the local community as well as in the areas which are dominated by technology and advancement. Unfortunately, the upholders of law are mute spectator and perpetrators to the crime. But if women's revolt is supported by someone like Gopal or by other women, it could have a different end. The resistance will have to come from the woman herself to begin with.

Mallika, an entrepreneur, was a self-sufficient woman. She has loved Gopal since a long time. However, since Gopal is non-committal she does not force him in accepting any relation which he does not want. It is a question of her prestige. She feels that since she is older to Gopal, he has a right to choose a younger woman for himself. However, her friends, Raziya and Sonali are aware of her feelings:

I'm supposed to be a stabilizing constant in your brother's erratic emotional history. (Angrily) But that's not a role I'm Mprepared to play. (Mehta, 60)

I'm economically independent. I don't need security, so I don't sell myself. (Mehta, 61)

Mallika runs a business and her partner, Mr. Pinglay, happens to be a middle aged married man. The partner has made a beeline for Mallika's secretary, Thelma, who was caught

by Mr. Pinglay using the office EPBAX for her personal use. To ensure that her job remains, Thelma, allows the advances of this man. Finally, she hands over her resignation to Mallika one day. On quizzing her, Mallika comes to know of the truth. But she cannot take any action against him. He is her business partner. In this way, Mallika though makes a strong decision to protect Thelma from her partner's advances; she is unable to throw him out.

In the beginning of the play, while Mallika is waiting for Sonali to meet her at the restaurant, a stranger sitting a couple of tables away makes innuendos. The way Mallika tackles the stranger at the beginning and towards the end of the play shows her bold personality. She is even concerned about the widows in the frames captured by Gopal and supports him in adopting Minzari's daughter. Her opinion "Our widows die many times before their death" (74) reveals her concern for other women. When she hears of Habib's second marriage from Raziya, she is aghast. Her conversation with Raziya strongly presents her revolting personality, her spirit to resist, her recalcitrance:

one just has to find out what a woman will tamely submit to – and you have the exact measure of indignity that can be heaped on her . . . At least Sonali is tearing herself up–injecting chaos in her world–to disrupt an order she finds oppressive!(Mehta, 77)

Dr. Raziya was a professional. Her husband was also a doctor. Yet, the husband agrees to remarry, a girl nineteen years old, for the sake of an offspring. Raziya's mother-in-law was the initiator of this match. Raziya had undergone tests to confirm her fertility. But her husband's manhood could not be put under observation. The point which drives us is that mother-in-law being a woman failed to look into Raziya's life as a woman wanting a child and being denied for no fault of hers. The woman alone is responsible for tormenting another woman. The second point, despite theirs being a love marriage Habib had assented to his second marriage to please his mother. Raziya had consented for she loved Habib and could understand his agony in displeasing his mother by refusing to marry. Therefore, this strikes that Raziya had chosen the soft option. Rather than revolting, she is a silent protagonist. She preferred to be oppressed due to her traditional feminine world approach.

Rather than revolting she submits to her fate. She admits that "I find an ancient tyranny at work within me".(Mehta, 78) But her self-realisation and confession to Mallika that "don't fool yourself ... by identifying Man as the villain we have won our fight for equality. The enemy is within, don't you see? *It is in our minds, Mallika, that we are underlings!*"(Mehta, 78) can also be seen as the first step that will lead to resistance against the brutality and injustice done to women. At one point in the play her statement to Mallika that "stop assessing yourself through male eyes" (Mehta, 73) also reveals a spark of resistance in her. Most of the women in our country don't realize that violence is being created against them. They accept it as a part of their

normal life. They have to rise for their own emancipation by breaking the bonds of tradition heaped on them to confront themselves.

Dina Mehta, through her play, highlights the fact that the roots of violence lie in the dark psyche of the patriarchal order of the world. All the women represented in the play are stereotypes of our existing system. The resistance has to come from within the self to overpower the oppression. If the man is the perpetrator then he is also the saviour. The society is in urgent need of recalcitrance against the patriarchal setup/society for improving the state of women. The women have to choose not to submit to the demands of society but resist against the ceaseless oppression they have gone through and decide to take control of their life in their own hands. They have to fight their weaknesses in order to invert traditional paradigms, to be empowered and protected against male-dominated ideologies. The subversion has to be from within for the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchal society.

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