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Women and Patriarchy: Gender based Violence in Dina Mehta's *Brides are not for Burning*

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Abstract: The present paper explores how Dina Mehta's *Brides are not for Burning* depicts women's exploitation and subjection that are prevalent in patriarchal societies. The patriarchal idea of man as the head of the family and community is ingrained in Indian women through history and custom, making them susceptible to violence on both at social and domestic level. The socio-cultural stereotyping of women as subservient to men gives enough space to gender based violence played upon the body of a woman. In fact, the most heinous form of violence against women comes when they are exploited within their homes. Mehta's *Brides are not for Burning* highlights the harsh reality that patriarchal system continues to burn women in our culture. Through the play she effectively conveys the idea that patriarchy is a process by which male control undermines women's place in society rather than an isolated incident.

Key Words: Violence, Patriarchy, Bride-Burning, Indian Women, Dina Mehta.

Women in Indian society hold multiple roles within the family. In the guise of a *devi*, they are revered and worshipped as mothers at one level, but as wives, they are also undermined. The patriarchal idea of male dominance in the family and community is ingrained in Indian women through history and custom, making them susceptible to violence on both at social and domestic level. The system's defined ideas of masculine and feminine interact to give precedence to the needs, choices and likings of men over those of the women since sexual politics functions as the fundamental foundation of patriarchy. The socio-cultural stereotyping of women as subservient to men gives enough space to gender based violence played upon the body of a woman. The hegemonic concept of domination of one over the other sets platform for power politics. According to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, "violence against women" is primarily

caused by “unequal power relations.” It is these unequal relations that “led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into subordinate position compared to men” (Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women, 1993). Gender justice, liberty, fraternity, and equality cannot be established in society because of this unequal power dynamic. Social and cultural norms have conditioned women to be subservient to men; nevertheless, if this framework of cultural norms is questioned or broken, the marriage would undoubtedly falter.

The present paper explores how Dina Mehta’s play, *Brides are not for Burning* depicts women’s exploitation and subjection that are prevalent in patriarchal societies. The play effectively conveys the idea that patriarchy is a process by which male control undermines women's place in society rather than an isolated incident. Male dominance and female subordination within the family or community are fundamentally rooted in patriarchy. Though, literally, the term patriarchy means, as V. Geetha writes in her book *Patriarchy* “the absolute rule of the father or the eldest male member over his family” (Geetha 4), yet, now, it is seen as a system in which women are subordinated to men resting on the defined notions of masculine and feminine placed by “sexual and property arrangements that privilege men’s choice, desires and interests over and above those of women in their lives” (Geetha 8). Allan G. Johnson, an American writer, also defined patriarchy as “a society in patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege, by being male dominated, male identified and male centered” (Johnson 5). According to the feminist historian Gerda Lerner, one of the main causes and effects of patriarchy is the way men control women's sexuality and reproductive abilities. She presents a number of arguments regarding the genesis and perpetuation of patriarchy as a system of women’s oppression in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, coming to the conclusion that patriarchy is socially constructed, perceived as normal, and imperceptible. The sociologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (cited by Tomar 832). Hence, the primary cause of women's suffering and violence is patriarchal society and its standards. Women must endure various forms of violence from womb to tomb in a male-dominated society; they are even denied human rights.

Among India's most renowned female writers, Dina Mehta occupies a highly significant place. She is one of the “most prolific writers who presented the women's issues through her writing” particularly, the “issues of subjugation, oppression and dehumanization” (Mahajan and Girase 5916). Her play *Brides Are Not for Burning* highlighted the harsh reality that the women in our society are “still burning in the flames of patriarchal system” (Kirdat 141). In fact, the most heinous form of violence against women comes when they are exploited within their homes. *Brides Are Not for Burning*, which secured first place at the B.B.C. sponsored global competition in 1979, addresses the issues of dowries and the coercion of brides who fail to provide plenty of money. Laxmi's obsessive suicide, which her in-laws claim was an accident, serves as the basis for the play's plot. The same is demonstrated by the investigative agency. Malini, Laxmi's sister, attempts to learn the truth about her sister's death, but she receives little assistance from her family—particularly from her brother Anil, her boyfriend Sanjay and Tarla, who was Laxmi's friend. Praggnaparamita Biswas writes that “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” She further writes that it presents a critique of the “age old social system that does not pay respect to its women and treat them as possession” (Biswas 7). Dina Mehta has addressed the problem of dehumanization in the play with realistic care.

Domestic violence is a harsh reality of the so-called civilized society that has persisted for centuries. It is always disregarded and invisible because of the notion that anything that takes place inside a house is “private” and that anyone who interferes with it is violating that person's privacy. Emergence of women's movements, however, brought attention to the problem of domestic violence since they believed that what is personal is political and this kind of violence implies the misuse of power (Kesarwani 203). The “patriarchal ideology”, according to Ameer Sultana, “perpetuates women's dependence and replicates itself through violence in the private domain, thereby men try to control or deny women's equality both in the public and private sphere” (Sultana 43). In *Brides Are Not for Burning* Mehta speaks out against “the deaths of innocent women like Laxmi, which are abundant in India” (Devika 304). Laxmi falls prey to the cruel dowry culture, a byproduct of the patriarchal social system. Because she did not bring enough dowry, she was subjected to

abuse and treated like an object than a "subject" at her in-laws' house. Even the bride, Laxmi, is insured against any unnatural accident by the avaricious Marfatia family. It becomes apparent that she had insurance coverage of 80,000 rupees following her accidental death from fire. Her husband Vinod will receive a reimbursement from the insurance company for this unnatural homicide. Ironically, Vinod's family must undergo a proper inquiry with supporting documents in order to receive a statement of clearance for this procedure. In Laxmi's case, the family sets up a false police *panchnama*, a group of eyewitnesses from their own family that includes Vinod, their mother-in-law Arjun, their domestic help Kalu, and their neighbor Tarla (Kirdat 142). In exchange for her reluctance to appear in court, they reach a settlement with Tarla's unemployed husband. The 10% payment was even offered to Laxmi's brother Anil as an incentive to keep quiet. It also becomes apparent that the family tells the doctor and the fire department after several hours of this incident. Rinki Bhattacharya rightly observed in book *Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence in India* that these days, violence against women occurs frequently in patriarchal societal structures, both inside and outside of homes. According to her any "traditional custom that places women in subordinate positions within society or in the family has the potential to turn violent" (Bhattacharya 14-15). She also notices that women are abused, devalued, and subjugated in Indian culture, which is rife with prejudice towards women.

The purpose of literature is to represent the outer and the inner world of the society. Home is viewed in Indian literature as a place that ignites emotions, memories, and sentiments due to its secure, comfortable, and familiar boundaries. The site does not elicit these qualities, though, if each resident's relationship is disturbed by one person's transgression of the other's rights due to gender. It is both a general notion and a historical fact that women are considered "other" and inferior to men. Gender is essentially socially constructed that signifies the dominance of men in the household and the marginalization of women in other facets of society. Women's literature, particularly Dina Mehta's plays, protested against this idealization of women's subservience to male authority and virility. The Indian novelist, Shashi Deshpande, in "No (Hu) man is an Island" argues that "women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings but one half of the human race." She believed that "women (and men as well) should not be straight-jacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them" (Deshpande 131). But, women "have been straight-jacketed" into roles that

has distorted “their personality” transforming “them into” the tale of persecution and this tale of persecution “does not take place only outside but also within the liminal periphery of the threshold” that limited woman’s status in “family and society” (Kesarwani 202). Deshpandey further claims:

It’s hard for women everywhere and “a little harder for Indian [sub- continental] women because the family really does claim you. It’s not just the immediate family; it’s the extended family, and most of the family duties are taken over by women. The men are the pillars of the family, but the work, including the emotional network and the bonding and all these things like bringing the family together—it’s all done by women. (Deshpande 131)

Women have been marginalized to fall under the label of "subaltern" due to the patriarchal social structure, which rests the social position of a woman on her relationships with men. Moreover, as M. Preethi Devi writes, “gender reflections in society are so pervasive that most of them are not even aware of their manifestations” (Devi 29). Kumar and Narendra also agree that the “andocentric system is sustained to a large extent by the subjugation and oppression of women” (Kumar & Narendra 143). *Brides Are Not for Burning* highlights those problems that expose the patriarchal culture. Through her plays, Dina Mehta essentially aims to draw attention to the various social factors contributing to the devaluation of women. Her female characters experience many forms of exploitation. They experience psychological and emotional depressions in addition to physical repressions. Mehta uses her plays to try and make the voices of the subaltern heard. She believes that the subaltern and dehumanizing state of women is caused by patriarchy and patriarchal perspectives.

The title of the play *Brides are not for Burning* is suggestive of “a theatrical presentation of the violence against women by the so – called pillars (family or in-Laws) of the society” (Devi 27). In fact, this is a common societal issue in India, and the play portrays the persecution that brides face who do not provide plenty of "dowry"—money, assets, or property that a woman delivers to her in laws at the time of wedding. Mehta’s mouthpiece, Malini asks satirically: “Isn’t it funny... that with a fat dowry Laxmi would have been a flaming success overnight—instead of a heap of ashes today?” (Mehta 51). It is obvious that this kind of attitude toward “marriage and relationships is a sign of the broader breakdown” (Chakravarty and M. 198) of

social standards. Laxmi might have lived a life of happiness with her in laws if she had substantial amount of money to support herself.

It is quite paradoxical that in India, a female is called "*grihlaxmi*" when she is married and moves into a new house, but if she doesn't bring *laxmi* as a dowry, her new family member will beat, torture, and burn her in the same house. This is what Mehta has presented in her play *Brides are not for Burning* as its title itself suggest that a girl who became a bride as a source of dowry for her in-laws. The play "goes beyond the typical feminist agenda" by reflecting a wider "perspective in which" violence and cruelty against "women is unleashed by not just men but also complicit" women trapped in "a narrow patriarchal order" (Devika 303). Ameer Sultana proposes that women are the chief targets of domestic violence which often happens in the marital family; however, at the same time she also claims that "the existence of violence in the parental home cannot be overlooked" (Sultana 39). Laxmi's parents and her in-laws both oppress her. She was not adequately educated and was forced to drop out of school at an early age. Malini reveals: "Because with mother always pregnant and ailing, she had to baby-sit for us! Laxmi was the brightest of us all. What right had Father to hold her back? It makes me sick, all this endless breeding and spawning" (Mehta 17). Although, Doctors have detected issue with her husband, yet Laxmi's mother-in-law continuously accuses her of being a sterile woman. She is held responsible for her childlessness by her father as well. Women are taught to hide the brutal truth of their oppression rather than discuss their tumultuous lives in the home. In any case, a woman is viewed as having moral failings if she dares to reveal her crumbling marriage. Maybe this was the reason Laxmi preferred to suffer in silence rather than confront the anguish and suffering her husband had imposed upon her. Zaidi and Qureshi rightly comment:

The South Asian societies have turned home into an ideal location for the exercise of masculine aggression and domination. Generally speaking, women in South Asian countries are tied in such a way to the tradition and social custom of the country that it retards the development of women. (Zaidi & Qureshi 7)

This masculine aggression and domination is intricately dealt with as a theme by Dina Mehta in her play. The portrayal of domestic violence as a "private" matter compels Indian women to endure their suffering in silence

rather than speaking out against it. That is why violence against women has become a prevalent concern of the women's movement in South Asian countries. Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* appears as a clear critique of a number of issues that are encouraged in Indian society as well as crimes against women in patriarchal societies, such as dowry deaths. Both "the idealized projections of men's sexual resentments and terrors" (Ganguli 87) are rejected by Dina Mehta in her plays. Despite being illegal, the dowry system is still prevalent in India. This two-act drama explores this theme in order to delve into the injustices that still beset woman to a secondary existence. Malashri Lal writes:

The threshold is a real as well as a symbolic bar marking a critical transition. Men have traditionally passed over the threshold unchallenged and partaken of both worlds, the one within and the other 'without'. Women have been expected to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries of home. (Malashri Lal 12)

The bride is typically conditioned to be a passive victim in traditional Indian culture in order to avoid bringing shame to her family by being the "desirable Bahu" (Sajitha 1280). In gender-patterned social system, daughters are supposed to be married as soon as possible to represent a respectable family. This way, the Indian parents can be proud of their filial responsibilities.

Thus, in its supposedly feminist and morally humanist discourse, *Brides are Not for Burning* demonstrates the subjection of women in the home and declares an anti-dowry slogan. In addition to acknowledging sexism, the Dina Mehta makes a deliberate attempt to refute the erroneous patriarchal presumption that women are supposed to be the targets of violence and repression. In Indian society, the man-woman relationship has been defined by the hegemonic concept of power. The desire for power contributes to the social discord that leads to gender-based violence in the community and society. Kate Millet also emphasized, as mentioned by Catharine A. Mackinnon in the "Foreword", that unless we "eliminate the most pernicious of our systems of oppression, unless we go to the very center of the sexual politics and its sick delirium of power and violence, all our efforts at liberation will only land us again in the same primordial stews" (Kate Millet 22). In society and culture, women are viewed as inferior and are dominated by men regardless of the status or power they

are given. Simone de Beauvoir correctly said in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir 301).

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