

Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*: Ravaging the Wall of Deception

- Durgesh Bhausahab Ravande

Abstract

Dina Mehta's highly acclaimed play Brides Are Not for Burning offers a wide criticism on the contemporary social issues like bride burning in our country. The playwright is here in a vibrant protective mood. The sample bride burning case represents various aspects related to this social problem. It shows veritable concern for the growing evil in our society on the one hand, and it exposes the hidden hypocrisy of the so called sophisticated people. The playwright does not present the problem only, but a way out by providing practical solution to the issue. The protagonist of the play, Malini takes a judicious decision of completing her law education and then using it for the cause of others like Laxmi. The present article is an elaborate study of this central issue and also its protagonist's transmutation from being confused to becoming concerned.

Keywords:

Deception, domestic violence, victimization, bride burning, justice, gender, movement, evil, homicide, rescue, dichotomy and Amendment

Dowry system is among the most pervasive social evils in India. The bride burning cases can simply be reckoned as an outrage of this system. A young woman is burnt by her husband and in-laws or she is forced to commit suicide on the ground of demand for more money in the form of dowry. It's regarded now 'as an important public health problem in India.' The ratio of death is shocking as between 600-750 women are burnt alive in a year. The National Crime Bureau, Home Ministry, India reported in 2004 the stunning figures of dowry victims. According to its report the number of brides burnt in the year 1998 were 2,209 in 1999 it reached to 5,199 whereas 6,851 young married women became martyr in the year 2001. The intensity of this evil isn't alleviated yet. According to CNN, a leading News Channel, the Indian Police receives more than 2,120 reports of death per year.

The government of India passed the Dowry prohibition Act in 1961 itself to proscribe domestic violence. Indian Penal Code mentions : "a bride within seven years of her marriage is killed and it's shown that soon before her death, she was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband such death be called as dowry death" (IPC : 304). The 1986 Amendment goes a step further as it considers burning of a woman as a criminal offence. Mostly the laws and amendments in this regard are found on the paper because the offenders are seldom punished. A recent

study of OUP states that eighty-eight percent fire accidents occur in kitchen and mostly women are victims in such accidents. Varsha Bhagat in her essay “Unnatural Deaths of Women in Gujarat” discloses: “Six women are burnt on an average in Gujrat” (*Violence against Women Women against Violence: 2*).

The present paper contemplates to study Dina Mehta's seminal play *Brides Are Not for Burning* considering an angry young woman's attempt of ravaging the wall of deception. Writer's vibrant protective mood in this sample dowry case is projected on a middle class Gujarati family is transmuted to Malini, victim's younger sister. The play stands as a dichotomy between appearance and reality. This dichotomy is at the root of evil taking place around. Technically speaking the play is divided in two acts. The acts in the play are further divided into eight scenes. The patriarchal assumptions are challenged here. The play is all about newly married woman Laxmi's Suspicious death. It's not a modest story of a particular middle class Gujarati family but meaningful and larger chronicle of the violence taking place on the ground of gender inequality. In her essay “The concept of violence” Suma Chitnis blames: “The hierarchical systems of social organizations, where there are categories of dominant groups and subordinate groups, is inevitably accompanied by the victimizations of the later through open force” (12). On other hand Kalindi Muzumdar in her essay “*Women and Violence: A Human Rights Perspectives*” evinces overt violence as “a part of a spectrum denying them the right to life, liberty and security of the person, to health and education, to their earnings at work, to the choice of a career or a partner in marriage” (2). The play *Brides Are Not for Burning* interweaves the concept of Violence through a woman's mental torture and inhuman treatment. It's also about an initial conflict between Malini's pragmatism as well as radicalism and Anil's Utopian and rational traits.

The play opens with a dialogue between Malini and her father, a desperate due to daughter's earlier and unnatural death. His mental state after the incident can be realized when he states: “Then who is in the kitchen? Laxmi? No no Laxmi got married five years ago... she never comes to see us these days.” (12) It's really difficult for him to abide the ferocity being performed on his daughter by her husband and in-laws. But like many other fathers his cry for justice is 'cry in wilderness.' He is not capable enough to take any action against the messengers of death. He recollects in wistful state the incident on Laxmi's marriage day. Vinod's uncle insulted him by flanging the hundred rupees note at his feet for arrangement of extra guests. Usually sympathy is not shown towards bride's father on such occasions. He wishes that killers of Laxmi should be severely punished but unable to do anything in this regard. Further Malini is fervent to listen coroner's verdict from her brother, Anil.

Malini: Good. I'm waiting to hear the verdict.

Anil: Accident

Malini: (*Grimly*) I see. They decided Laxmi's sari was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident (15).

Malini shows an unacceptance to the verdict because she believes

strongly that it was not an accident but cold-blooded murder. Malini is angry young woman who determines to eradicate evil from society. She is under the impression of extremist convictions. She has a radical way to find out the solutions. Anil, on the other hand remains quiescent and thinks practically. He knows very well that justice is not easily possible. Vinod's family has a strong economical status whereas Anil's family is in economical meagre. Laxmi was mentally tortured and ill-treated. Her in-laws used to taunt *".... A goddess of wealth had entered their home with clothes fit for a servant and jewels not worth the names."* (13). Tarla, Laxmi's neighbour and friend kept informing Malini about Laxmi's torment. Now Tarla is not ready to speak a single word about incident. Anil knows exact grounds behind change in her attitude. Her silence is responsible for coroner's verdict against Laxmi. Silence is worst when it stands in opposite of truth. Anil discloses the fact that people generally prefer to keep mum in such cases. It's an escapism – an attempt to run away from the truth.

There were two reasons behind ill-treatment given to Laxmi (i) appetite for more dowry and (ii) Laxmi was considered responsible for having no child even after five years of marriage. But according to doctor's report Vinod's impotency is solely responsible for this abortive state. It's common in patriarchal society that a woman is considered as guilty for no fault on her part. Here Laxmi is projected as a barren instead Vinod as an impotent. Malini decides to proceed further for justice but Anil argues *"Come on, Malu. She is gone now. Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress..."* (18). She disagrees with Anil on the issue of transparency in judicial system. Justice is meant for opulent, only. Poor people are always unjustified. Like Osbornian hero Malini resolves to challenge favoritism in society. She starts showing an interest in Roy's extremist movement. He leads an organization of an aggrieved politicized group of unemployed ex-students who are wedded to radical ideology. Being a balanced teacher Anil has no faith in such traits. He believes firmly that an extremist way can't be a lasting solution to social injustice. Such axioms can rarely finish inequality from society. Malini doesn't care for Anil's stance. She conveys her intention of fighting through extremist means. She adds:

"I shall prowl among her neighbors asking questions.
Question the mother-in-law who with her tongue for a hatchet
set about demolishing my sister..." (19).

Roy's role in the play is decisive. He ruminates that change is possible only through violence. His ideology never attracts Anil but enchants Malini. Anil is anxious about Malini's relation with Roy and her capitalist boyfriend, Sanjay.

The character of professor Palkar represents an elegant views towards the student movements. He also shows his discontentment for Anil's preference to become a village school teacher. Being his star student he expected a different and glorious career. He informs Anil about Malini's association with an extremist group. Her amalgamation with this group would ruin her life, one day. This extremist movement, not wholly but to some extent analogous to early seventies Naxalite movement in Kolkata

and other parts of West Bengal. Here a social change is expected though violent agencies. Prof Palkar regards Roy as 'a trouble maker'. He has apprehension regarding Malini's future.

The third scene in first act of the play constitutes a discourse between Malini and Sanjay. They reveal opposite views on extremist movement. Sanjay is of use and throw mentality. Being a capitalist he believes firmly that the workers should be used only for production purpose. It's not at all manufacturer's responsibility to look after worker's welfare. Malini for Sanjay is not more than a medium of fulfilling his sexual desire. According to Sanjay business is not more than a matter of profit and the workers are no more than productive sources. Sanjay asserts: "*How can a business run without profits?*" (45). Sanjay undertones here the age-old conflict between the capitalists and the proletariats.

Malini tells Sanjay about coroner's verdict. Sanjay shocks her by telling that he employed Tarla's husband to keep Vinod's word. Tarla knows very well that Laxmi died not accidentally but was cold bloodedly murdered. Vinod's family showed sympathy for Tarla not out of humanity but to curb reality. But they never knew Laxmi died but not truth because truth sits upon the lips of dying men. Malini found shortcomings in verdict. These imperfections can lead her towards absolute justice. Malini's long stay with Sanjay gave her an opportunity to appraise Sanjay's personality. She realized lastly that for Sanjay she is not more than a commodity. He is not distinct than other materialists for whom profit is everything. She expected his assistance in her fight for justice.

But there isn't any possibility of his assistance in her endeavor. Malini's determination encourages her enough to keep the spirit.

The first scene in second act begins with a conversation between Malini and her father. It's uneasy for father to forget daughter's death. It's onerous for father of any married daughter to face the reality.

The important development in the play takes place when Anil goes Vinod's office to meet him. Anil asks Vinod : "*What was the amount for which Laxmi's life insured?*" (59). Vinod tries to convey Anil that it was an accident while averting Laxmi from burning he got his hand burnt. Anil informs Vinod about the decision of fresh inquiry. They argue :

Anil: Justice. There are certain vital questions that were not raised at the inquest, certain incongruities that were not explained.

Vinod: Really? Such as?

Anil: (*Sitting*) such as why no doctor was summoned till three and half hours after Laxmi's death.

Vinod: Damn it, the kitchen fire was spreading - the place was an inferno, yet I called Dr. Lodha before I called the fire brigade – but he was out! (59-60).

Vinod denies Anil's objection of not calling doctor, immediately. He tries to ensure Anil that each possible step was taken to save Laxmi's life. Vinod emphasizes coroner's verdict which shows their innocence. There isn't any point left in the case because court has freed them all. But Anil argues that Dr. Lodha was not called till eleven at night. Hence it's not an accident but cold-blooded murder- a pre-planned homicide. Tarla's

witness was bought over to subdue truth. Outwardly Vinod was trying to counterfeit that he has no fear regarding new inquest in the case but couldn't hide his growing worry. Vinod perceives cracks in the wall. Vinod and his family members built-up a wall between reality and pretence. Their attempt is successfully undone in course of time.

The third scene in second act engrosses an importance because Malini reaches Tarla's home to ascertain the real. Tarla hesitates earlier; converse the development took place on the day of incident. Laxmi was considered solely responsible for not having a child even after five years of marriage. Tarla denies to give intact details to Malini and forces her to go away from her house. Tarla's silence underlines a crucial aspect in such cases. Passivity of good people helps Evil in the world. Despite being Laxmi's good friend and an eyewitness, Tarla hides certain details because Vinod reinstated her husband in a job. Tarla's escapism becomes responsible for present verdict. Laxmi's mother-in-law is at Tarla's door. Her unexpected arrival becomes the cause of Tarla's apprehension. Malini reaches to Vinod's home to explore the truth. She comes to know from Arjun that Laxmi was not responsible at all for not having a child. The fault was purposefully projected on Laxmi to avoid the blemish. Malini discloses the grains of reality. No one came to Laxmi's rescue when she was burning in the kitchen. Malini speaks out after discovering truth : *"You make me sick to my stomach ! you murdered my sister as surely as if your hand had sent her up in flames. You are a murderess ! (screaming). You murdered her ! Murdered her !"* (83).

Malini's voyage to discern the actual motive behind her sister's death unearths a series of reasons behind the brutal. Now she has to single out the way of her strive for justice. Either she should join Roy's camp or continue her Law education. Finally she decides to complete her education and stand firmly to get justice for many unjustified brides in society. Her decision can be seen as a lasting solution on such issues. If angry young women like Malini come together and unite; women like Laxmi burning under patriarchal burden can be saved. If Laxmi is a metaphor of violence against women surely Malini is a representative of women against violence. She is the John-of-Arc-the voice of voiceless.

Works Cited :

- Bhagat, Varsha. "Unnatural Deaths of Women in Gujarat" in Kudchedkar, Shirin & Sabiha Al-Issa eds. *Violence Against Women Women Against Violence*. 1998. New Delhi : Pencraft International. pp 129-139.
- Chitnis, Suma. *"The concept of Violence"*. in Kudchedkar, Shirin & Sabiha Al-Issa eds. cited above. pp 11-18.
- Mehta, Dina. 1993. *Brides Are Not for Burring*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co. pp. 94.
- Muzumdar, Kalindi. "Women and Violence: A Human Rights Perspective" in Shirin & Sabiha Al-Issa eds. *Violence Against Women Women Against Violence*. 1998. New Delhi : Pencraft International. pp 28 – 48.

