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Literary Theories

Brides Are Not for Burning: A Feminist Reading of Dowry Death and Patriarchal Power Politics in Dina Mehta's Play

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Abstract: The incidents of "bride burning" and "dowry death" are heinous acts of violence that reduce Indian daughterhood into a precarious position in the country's socioeconomic context. A dowry is a gift of property from the bride's family to the bridegroom, during the marriage ceremony. The reference to "stree dhana" in ancient Indian religious texts demonstrates that it is a customary practice in marriage. An outline of the Indian feminist movement makes clear that the idea of dowry death or bride burning as a social crime did not come to the public's notice until the latter part of the 1980s. For the first time, dowry deaths previously thought of as suicides were referred to as "murders" during the 1979 Delhi campaign against dowry murders. Dowry deaths, often known as "bride burning," are the term used to describe the deaths of young brides who were being hounded by their in-laws for additional dowries. The rise in dowry-related marital violence against women has already transcended the separation and pushes the married family into a risky situation. The irony, however, is that the majority of cases go unreported, therefore there is no chance of prosecution. This tragedy is equally the result of the sociospatial strategies of the miserable daughter's natal and married households. As a result, dowry death simultaneously represents the squalid power politics of patriarchy and serves as an example of interpersonal violence. The goal of this study is to examine Dina Mehta's award-winning play "Brides Are Not for Burning" from the standpoint of "bride burning" and its disastrous effects. It depicts the stark reality of Indian society, where women are viewed as nothing more than dowry bags.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Power Politics, Feminist Movement, Dowry Death, and Stree Dhana.

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The custom of paying a dowry has been a part of Indian marriage culture since the Vedic era. The Hindu mythology's scriptural dowry culture, sometimes referred to as "streedhan," quietly describes the exchange of money before a daughter's wedding under the stench of power politics and corruption. The basis upon which justifications for prejudice against women have been constructed is dower. It conceptualizes the many analytical aspects: feminists characterize it as an instrument of gender discrimination, Marxists affirm it as an economic institution, and colonialists emphasize its cultural roots in a benighted Hinduism. The disempowerment of women is sustained by Manu's very opinion, which also strengthens the daughter's disinheritance from her parents' possessions. As a result, this system not only puts a girl's marriage in danger, but it also encourages prospective parents to commit the horrible crime of female feticide. The desire for a boy child is not a deliberate human aberration; rather, it is an unconscious pressure on parents to relieve themselves of the dowry burden for female children. Because daughters are undesirable in the first place, dowries just make them "burdensome." (Kishwar 8).

The economic burden that a daughter is perceived to entail is now blamed for the rise in violence against women, including dowry murders and abortions of female fetuses. A daughter is a vulnerable member of both her birth and married families; no one can avoid criminal culpability for the miserable girl's dowry death. The dowry system is actually a rotating hierarchical hierarchy that regulates the power dynamics inside the family to some extent. Even while the current dowry system is a product of patriarchal society, it is impossible to overlook its historical, sociocultural, and psychological components. The method is recognized as an institutionalized societal tool for maintaining women's subjugation based on minute monitoring of these factors. Feminist studies on dowries and the violence they cause allow us to highlight the sociological effects of this ongoing slaughter on our nation's women. As a result, the issues raised by this transaction are not only family issues; rather, they are phenomenological politics that devalue women.

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A dowry is a transfer of property from the bride's family to the bridegroom's at the time of marriage (Negi 14). Currently, the dowry usually consists of cash and material gifts for the bridegroom and his family. This tradition continues even after marriage. The dower paid at the moment of marriage is more than just a transaction in terms of the marriage (Negi 16). The dowry is usually regarded as a woman's property, over which she has total control.

In addition to improving her financial situation in the married home, the dowry acts as insurance in the event that the marriage ends for whatever reason. However, for the moment, it seems to make up for the financial strain her presence creates on the in-laws both before and throughout the marriage. As a result, the dowry's significance progressively shifts from being a *kanyaadaan* *dakshina* to a forcible wedding bargain. Since the daughter has no right to inherit her father's belongings after marriage and the son will automatically become the owner, dowries are typically an alternate method of giving the daughter some paternal property. In actuality, the system that denies daughters access to their father's property raises the demand for dowries.

Literary justifications for the continuation of the dowry system center on sociocultural, theological, and economic considerations. By marrying the daughter into a well-established, financially secure family, the majority of bridal families in Indian society hope to raise the social standard. In order to meet these requirements, parents typically get ready to sponsor a huge sum of money for the dowry. The groom families use this circumstance to their advantage in order to increase their revenue through the "subho vivah" business. Because of this, women from lower-income households frequently have to stay alone or have unsatisfying partners. In contrast, less educated yet wealthy brides marry into wealthy households due to their family's excellent financial skills. Therefore, the underlying cause of gender discrimination and unequal marriage in our society is the unequal distribution of property and its accumulation among some money-minded individuals. This, in turn, leads to dowry malfunction through the institutionalization of matrimony. For this reason, parents would rather have a boy than a girl since, whilst a girl grows up in the family home and is subsequently given a large dowry, a guy can guarantee financial support from both his job and the dowry. Once more, Indian attitudes on divorced or single women are too strict for them to lead healthy lives in society, and the only way to repair this division is through marriage. Even though divorce is permitted under Indian civil law, divorce is largely discouraged by sociocultural upbringing and deeply ingrained beliefs. As a result, the dowry system and its insufficiency facilitate the smooth operation of the violence apparatus. Furthermore, the majority of Indian brides lack formal education and choose to play the part of ideal housewives, which limits their knowledge and reduces their ability to provide for their families financially. They are in a state of *nugatory* due to their restricted access to reproduction and unpaid household duties. As a result, the dowry is the primary focus. We may say that girls are little more than dowry bags in this regard.

However, the practice of offering and receiving dowries is a form of social crime. In the years 1984, 1985, and 1986, the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act was modified. This act further specifies that dowry payments must be reimbursed in the event that a marriage fails. Even though not everyone who uses the dowry system is involved in domestic abuse, there is a complementing relationship between the two. Serious consequences arise when the daughter's in-laws' avaricious expectations are not satisfied by arbitrary demands. The frequent result of this unfulfilled greed is domestic violence, which includes both physical and emotional suffering and ultimately leads to the bride's dowry killing. A section that was included to the Indian Penal Code for the first time defined dowry deaths, a unique category of death. Section 304(b) of the 1986 law states that a woman who dies from burns or other physical harm within seven years of marriage and has proof of cruelty or harassment from her husband or his family members in response to a dowry demand is considered to have suffered "dowry death" and faces a minimum sentence of seven years in prison.

The incidents of "bride burning" and "dowry death" are heinous acts of violence that put Indian daughterhood in jeopardy in the country's socioeconomic context. The concept of bride burning or dowry killing as a social crime did not become widely known until the late 1980s, according to an account of the Indian feminist movement. When the fight against dowry murders started in Delhi in 1979, dowry deaths previously considered suicide were first called "murder." The term "dowry deaths" mainly refers to the deaths of young brides who were under pressure from their in-laws for extra dowries better known as "bride burning." Dowry-related violence against married women by the homes they marry into is an increasing problem in the country. Ironically, however, the majority of incidents go unreported, and the married family is not given the punishment for the offense. A daily look at the newspaper provides abundant evidence of the fact's exponential growth. Many concerns regarding the girl's safety, survival, and marital status are brought up by the heartbreaking murder case of Devyani Banik in Bengal in the late 1980s. As a result, domestic violence resulting from dowry death is a major social problem.

But the question is, what drives the in-laws to "murder" their bride, or what drives the new bride to make the drastic choice to end her life? In contrast to dowry, the causes of dowry deaths include the various feminist and psychological viewpoints of the offenders. Violence is inhumane, but dowries are a cultural custom. Feminist theory holds that institutionalized gender inequality, the societal duties of newlyweds, the prevailing social norms of male domination over resources, and the resulting belief in a man's entitlement to rule women's lives all contribute to violence.

The most crucial element in dowry violence in India is that the abuser and victim are connected to one another via their relationships with men. Thus, there is a subtle struggle to control the male's authority in the roles of mother and wife. Once more, as Indian women reach the pinnacle of their spousal economic status, their support of their sexual role with their husbands and ability to raise children scales as a measure of power dynamics in households. Therefore, the combination of gender and life-cycle-based hierarchies is what leads to the mother-in-law's involvement in violent acts due to her seniority within the authoritative structure. Following the arrival of a newlywed bride in her son's life, the ma-in-law becomes disengaged due to emotional and financial instability as well as a loss of decision-making authority, which eventually leads her to turn against the bride. One of the main causes of this violence, according to Indian psychologist Sudhir Kakar, is women's poor self-esteem in patriarchal societies.

Once more, the abuser is encouraged to exploit the persistence of violence by the learned helplessness resulting from the ingrained conviction. Women are more likely to give in to abuse than to resist it because of an oppressive system based on their imposed beliefs or past experiences. Maternal bond and a woman's emotional and financial reliance prevent her from ending the abusive relationship. Even a woman's parents persuade her to endure the abusive situation in order to prevent societal stigmatization. Therefore, the battered wife's only choice is to remain with her abusive married family. Women are thus permanently paralyzed by the denial of their economic rights and their inability to inherit paternal property.

Public attention was first drawn to the feminist and theatrical intervention in 1979 in Delhi, which articulated the reality of dowry and bride burning. In addition to attempting to identify the causes of such serious crimes, feminist activists also offer assistance by offering free counseling, housing a battered wife, advocating against domestic abuse, and looking for peaceful ways to resolve family disputes. Theater professionals use street theater as a tool to express their opposition to dowry deaths. In her analysis of Vanangana's street theater campaign, theater scholar Richa Nagar highlights the ways in which the venom of domestic abuse complicates women's life and attempts to impede their empowerment in the Chitrakoot area. This organization's activists concentrate on the dowry deaths of adjacent communities, which eventually helps women develop a political consciousness. In order to change the organization's agenda, the grassroots workers, who are mostly a "women-only" group, employ feminist street theater to advocate against domestic abuse.

They staged the play *Mujhe Jawab Do!*, which conceptualizes how campaigns spatialize and politicize public-private relations. Marriage, kinship, and the exploitation of women in married households are among the home issues it tackles. Their general goal is to draw attention to the fact that dowry murder is a crime that affects the community, the family, and the kinsman: nobody is exempt from accountability for a daughter's passing. Nothing more than the objectification of women is the wedding price. When dowry death occurs, the socio-spatial strategy of the natal and conjugal families suggests that women are not able to access resources, are devalued inside the home, and are also subordinated. Therefore, via women's drama, feminist activists and theater professionals try to raise public awareness of the seriousness of dowries and their effects.

Brides Are Not for Burning, Dina Mehta's award-winning documentary drama in Indian women's dramaturgy, exposes key social evils such as dowry death and its terrible effects. Mehta attempts to depict a realistic picture of Indian society, where women are viewed as little more than dowry bags. The audience is given a clear indication by this drama of the complex issues pertaining to women in our culture. Through the telescopic view of Mehta's mouthpiece Malini Desai, also known as Malu, the drama's "angry young woman," the audience-reader can witness all of these social evils. She learns the "secret" of her sister Lakshmi's death throughout the play, revealing the sociocultural politics that led to this catastrophe. Daughters are forced to sacrifice themselves on the altar of greed due to patriarchal cultural taboos.

The multifaceted gaps in society are unbolted by Lakshmi's tragic death. Her tragic departure politicizes the fact that a daughter's life is being put up for auction, so her death is not just an accident. The spectator is aware of the marital and parental scheme behind her death from the outset. The play's very setting makes the distinction between those who have and those who do not stand out. The acting locations, the Desai tenement (1) and Tarla's kitchen (4), are very simple and lower-middle class, whereas the other locations, such as Sanjay's living room (2), Vinod's workplace (3), and the in-laws' living room (5), show affluence. The spectator can therefore infer the tangible differences between the two families, which finally come to a head with Lakshmi's passing. Her father is severely humiliated by her in-laws during the marriage ceremony. However, he takes the insult without objecting, like a perpetual parent, in order to make his daughter's life easier. "Families that seek upward mobility through marriage alliances typically pay more exorbitant dowries, as the perceived economic status of the groom's family is one of the key determinants of the dowry payment amount." (Kishwar 14).

Mr. Desai therefore did his best by adhering to the conventional wisdom: "Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of silk...". They thought a government clerk made a lot of money on the side, so their expectations were limitless. They believed that I had used kickbacks and bribes to feather my nest. And because I wanted to give it my all for Laxmi, I allowed them to believe that! (13). Her father is therefore unable to escape the blame for the catastrophe. If Mr. Desai could break out from the tradition of paying a sizable dowry to improve his social status through his daughter's marriage and instead seek out a husband with a similar social standing, perhaps his daughter might survive. Since providing a dowry is also an accusation, the natal family should also take action to end the dowry system and prevent bride burning. Therefore, in order to stop this social scourge, the procedure should begin with the father. Mehta most likely purposefully brings up the acting locations to highlight the disparity in the economic backgrounds of the Desai and Marfatia families, which not only highlights consumerism but also sets the tone for the somber reality of dowry murder. Her dramatic insight thus draws attention to the catastrophic consequences of dowries, which are rooted in the unequal distribution of financial power.

Second, Laxmi's death has sufficient significance due to the Desai household's incorrect family planning. After six miscarriages in 10 years as a result of his unsuccessful effort at parenting, he divorces his first wife, Sujata. His second marriage produced three children, Laxmi, Anil, and Malu, all of them "were born in the first five years of marriage."

(14). However, he never considers its future. He is portrayed as "monsters of fecundity" (42) due to his unrestrained libido, insatiable yearning for offspring, and "endless breeding and spawning" (17). Given his wage and clerical work, he was unable to give his three children privileged surroundings. Even yet, he was unable to provide Laxmi with a proper education "because our mother had to babysit for us because she was always sick and pregnant!" (17). He may not have known about contraceptives and felt no limitations on having children. Since education cannot be used as a substitute for cash, his idea to make up for Laxmi's lack of education with dowry components is incorrect. As a result, he unwittingly becomes a villain to his kids. And the victim of this fatherly slaughter is Laxmi. The prodigality of fathering innumerable offspring is the subject of the 2011 Pakistani film Bol.

The insufficient dowry that Laxmi brought to the wedding is undoubtedly another major factor in her demise. Although the Marfatia family did not claim dowry, "they tortured and humiliated her because the dowry she brought them was not what they had angled for" (16). Therefore, politics plays a major role in the plan: the natal should be ready to fill the dowry bag occasionally even though the married family would not ask for the dowry directly. Unfortunately, the Marfatia family follows the same traditions as the urbanized so-called Protestants. Every day, Laxmi was made fun of by her mother-in-law for not keeping his word. Two sisters-in-law then began chanting that a goddess of wealth had come into their house wearing servant-appropriate clothing and diamonds that were unworthy of the moniker (16). In fact, Mr. Desai overlooks the well-known avarice formula: the wealthy desire more luxury and never stop demanding.

The Marfatia family's avarice appears to be uncontrollable, since they even insure their wife Laxmi against any untoward mishap. Laxmi told her sister Malu about it herself. It becomes apparent that she had insurance coverage of 80,000 rupees following her unintentional death from fire. This information has a significant political undertone: the insurance company will reimburse her husband Vinod for the insured money as restitution for this unnatural, cold-blooded murder. The married family must conduct a satirically appropriate inquiry with supporting documentation in order to receive a clean sheet for this procedure. Vinod, Arjun, their paid servant Kalu, and their neighbor Tarla form a fictitious police panchnama, a group of eyewitnesses from their own clan, in order to hide the truth in Laxmi's case. In exchange for Laxmi remaining silent in court, they also work out a settlement with her jobless spouse. The audience can so understand the plan. They use their money to employ the law. Even Laxmi's brother Anil was offered 10% of the money as a bribe to keep quiet. Even so, it turns out that they notify the doctor and fire department of the occurrence many hours later.

The psychological component of Laxmi's dowry death should not be disregarded, even though the sociocultural and economic explanations are compelling enough to support her suicidal intent. In Indian homes, a daughter's marriage marks her official admission into her husband's family, which is usually headed by his mother. Two women from diverse backgrounds must share the same kitchen. They must even have the same person's affection. "Two pairs of breasts will definitely get into a fight" is a sexist patriarchal statement. Sengupta, 93 Because of the marriage, the son now becomes a husband as well. His dual roles as a husband and son to two distinct but solely owned women, his mother and wife, complicate matters from an emotional and financial standpoint.

Brides from the Marfatia family... encounters the same issue: even if Laxmi was quiet and reserved, Vinod's mother-son tie may be being weakened by the arrival of a new bride. Given that she knows a significant secret about her son, the mother-in-law has made every effort to reduce the closeness of recently married couples. Thus, she skillfully employs the weapon of inadequate dowry to manage the circumstance. Her path gives her three opportunities: first, she may have complete control over her family; second, the bride will be accused of having her son's secret; and third, her son will be able to get a bigger dowry in the marriage market.

However, aside from all of these factors, Vinod's health issue is the primary driver for this dowry murder. After a minute of research, Malini identifies the wall's last crack. Her conversation with Arjun yields the most terrible news, which is brought to light by Ma and Arjun's argument: "That's the reality! And Ma, please don't even slap me once more. That's what your Vinod is. Eunuch. He needs to be employed at a harem. Why did he lead Laxmi bhabhi from one holy man to another in an endless farce? Even if you bought Vinod ten wives and forced him into bed with each one in turn, he wouldn't be able to have children. Like a gangster, he controls everyone! But you think I'm unaware that the physicians discovered him lacking sperm? You believe that I am unaware of the physicians, tests, and medications he has taken, including homeopathic, ayurvedic, and allopathic ones." - (81). Doctors have criticized her spouse, while the in-laws accuse Laxmi of being a sterile lady. Laxmi is also held accountable by her father for her infertility. However, Arjun's loud abuse reveals the family secret: Vinod lacks the capacity to act. Medical terminology refers to him as Ajustperm. Malini accomplishes her goal by pointing out the guilt. It is a prevalent belief in Indian society that girls are constantly stigmatized, even when there is no justification for it. Here, the play *Brides* has a lot in common with the film *Pahechan: The Face of Truth*, which stars Ravina Tandon as a lawyer who prevails for the natal family because the girl was given a death sentence for exposing her husband's incapacity.

Laxmi's thinking is greatly impacted by her mother-in-law's constant false accusations of fraud, poverty, and infertility. Even though this was a daily account of Laxmi's marital life, she was so offended by these remarks that she fled to the kitchen and locked herself in that night. And she burns herself alive out of sheer despair. The 'holy fire' propels her to the pyre. "Let her finish what she has started inside there," Ma replied in response to Vinod and Kalu's attempt to burst the door (80). Laxmi therefore joined the miserable list of bride burners.

Starting with a specific troubling issue, such as "dowry death," the drama progressively covers a wide range of undiscovered societal goals. The play, which is contained inside a single structure, makes observations about the marriage system, complicated human relationships, patriarchal taboos, the necessity for women to be literate, unemployment, and, most importantly, the overall socioeconomic state of India. It is a criticism of the long-standing social structure that treats women like property and shows no regard for them. The dramatist seeks to portray a collage of society in front of us by combining all these problems into a single thread. Therefore, the politics surrounding dowry death reveal a lot of well-known yet meaningless facets of existence. Ironically, the only thing that can clear the fog of it is the death toll; otherwise, victims continue to suffer in silence.

Mehta wants to draw attention to the various factors that contribute to dowry death. She wishes to highlight the brutality and the ensuing effects on the natal family through Laxmi's untimely death. Male involvement in encouraging violence against women is the most significant problem she brings up in her play. In the play, Anil, who portrays a male promotion against dowry, wins recognition alongside Malini. Despite being passive at first, he finally says the play's main line: "That brides are not for burning! Not as a ceremonial sacrifice offered on the altar of greed and selfishness." (63)

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