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**FLAMING EXTREMITIES IN DINA MEHTA'S BRIDES ARE NOT
FOR BURNING**

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Abstract:

In India's gender- patterned social structure, the daughters are expected to be marry off as soon as feasible to signify a reputable family in a traditional setting, so that the Indian parents can easily boast of top reasons out of their filial obligations. Even in the current reformed social setting, a new bride from penury marrying into a conservative Indian family may face a startling imprint of scripted torment that will culminate in mortality. In traditional India, it is normal that the bride is conditioned to be a passive victim in order to elude adding disgrace to her family by being the "desirable Bahu". Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* illustrates the subordination of women within the household and proclaims an anti-dowry motto in the author's ostensibly feminist and ethically humanist speech. Lakmi, a gendered subaltern who is persecuted by both her parents and her in-laws, struggles to accept the burden imposed by those who are supposed to defend and cherish her. Her demise is a misnomer as it was rather a compulsive attempt, not a natural death as her in-laws presume. The play strives to echo the essence of resistance in a dramatic form in order to undermine the aggression against females in the institution of marriage and family as a place to oblige and accomplish responsibilities. The melancholy of the family's bereavement of their eldest daughter Lakmi consumes the very outset of the drama.

The custom of dowry has been a part of the Indian marital tradition since the prehistoric Vedic period. The Hindu mythology's doctrinal dowry tradition, known as 'streedhan', implicitly recounted the phase of acquisition during the daughter's wedding under the fragrance of crime and power politics. Dowry is the cornerstone upon which reasons for gender inequality have been established. It organizes different theoretical perspectives: colonialists emphasize the cultural origins of a benighted Hinduism, Marxist observations certify it as an economic entity, and feminists characterize it as a weapon of gender

inequality. Intensified harassment towards women, such as dowry deaths and female feticide, has been ascribed to the monetary obligation that a daughter-in-law is supposed to embody. The number of dowry-related mortality rates has been skyrocketing even in the current scenario. Regardless of the overall progress in Indian women's current position in explicit domains, the commercialization of nuptial knots and the revilement it breeds outlives the principal roots of concern. Women in India attain a long pun approach, from being smothered in a patriarchal culture to racing in almost every sphere with men. Indian women have paraded their distinction in all realms, from space explorers to therapeutic pathfinders. However, the luxury of such legendary feminine initiation furnishes on front-page newspapers withers away almost every day as the media reports on back-page single-column dowry cases and brides burning issues. In several states, principally in the northern zone, the assaulting custom of dowry is still exercised. Dowry still exists and is occupied in India's metropolitan regions, not only by the ignorant but also by the accomplished elites.

Dowry has traditionally been correlated to the daughter-in-laws family's economic circumstances, and it has been absolutely commodified in its current nature. Today, dowry encompasses not only jewels, garments, and kitchenware, but also luxuries such as vehicles, furniture, household appliances etc. and in certain scenarios, even funds to support groom for his higher studies. The bride's families potential to compensate for the wedding relies on the amount of money and presents they get. Under certain circumstances, the value of dowry is assessed by the groom's career. Having followed the wedding, there are a myriad of rituals and ceremonies in which dowry is desired often, either in the shape of rewards or monetary value. In reality, retaining her in-laws and spouse's luxury by pumping money from her family is a life-long burden for her. The bride is sometimes assaulted and abused if the dowry figure is not directly impacted and this misconduct could exacerbate to the extent that the husband or his family slaughters the bride, perhaps by burning her from the stove, which may document as an accidental tragedy or a suicide.

Brides Are Not for Burning is one of Mehta's dynamic experiments that explores some of the extremities which is burning vigorously in our contemporary society. In the play, Mehta addresses the burgeoning societal issue of dowry as well as the aggravation of brides who fail to carry ample dowry to appease her in-law's appetite.

"Burning" is a theme that occurs in various dramatic texts ranging from the burning of Joan of Arc in Shaw's *St. Joan* (1924) to the burning of witches in Arthur Miller's *Crucible* (1952) and Christopher Fry's marvellous poetic play *The Lady Is Not for Burning* (1949) where with typical British wit Christopher "fries" the issue away (Ramaswamy, 2006)

Dowry is a transference of possessions from the bride's family to that of the bridegroom, at the spell of wedding. This system was initiated to bolster her financial standing in the marital household; however, it now obliges her to requite the monetary strain that her in-laws face during and after the marriage. In *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Mehta strenuously forecasts the contours of the Indian culture where women are nothing more than a sack of endowment. The readers can discern this social trash through the wide angle snap short of Mehta's spokesman, Malini Desai. She spots the mystery following her sister Laxmi's death. Lakshmi's traumatic demise untangles the multi-layered realms of society. Her departure is not simply a catastrophe; rather, her untimely withdrawal politicizes the reality that a daughter's life is up for auction.

The play commences off on a tragic mark with a conversation between Malini and her father, who is still reeling from his elder daughter Laxmi's death by immolation at her husband's home. Laxmi is despised by her in-laws' family as she's the daughter of a man who does not fulfil his contractual obligations in the marriage business. Laxmi's father remarks:

Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2,000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of silk... Their expectations were endless because they imagined a government clerk makes so much on the side. They thought I had feathered my nest with bribes and kickbacks... And I let them think that because I wanted to do my best for Laxmi. (13)

Being a government clerk, her father married her to the affluent businessman Vinod Marfatia, in the vain hope of resuscitating her from a life of destitution, fantasizing about his daughter's wellbeing in her in-law's house. But that contentment is consumed by the conflagrations. Malini suspects her Laxmi's demise to be a case of the bride burning.

The Marfatia family's vanity is indeed unbearable, as they even insure their bride Laxmi against any accidental catastrophe. Behind this fact, there is a concealed politicking: the insurance agency would compensate for this bizarre death by reimbursing the insurance coverage to her husband, Vinod. To receive a befitting reply from their part and to suppress the truth in Laxmi's case, the family sets up a group of informants from their own family group, comprising Vinod himself, his mother, Arjun, their servant Kalu, and their neighbour Tarla, with whom they strike a deal for her unemployed husband despite her reluctance to go to court. They hire the judiciary using their men and money power. Anil, Laxmi's brother, was also assured ten per cent of the money as a ransom to keep his mouth sealed.

Mehta, in this play, wonderfully illustrates women's patriarchy as she depicts women being victimised more by other women than by men. Laxmi's in-laws are vicious and callous in their approach to her. Laxmi's mother-in-law teases her regularly about her father's inability to hold his dowry vows. Laxmi's two sisters-in-law's yell at her that a goddess of wealth has meddled their home "with clothing suited for a servant and jewellery unworthy of the word" (16). The women in her husband's family further masked shrouded Laxmi's sentiments by blathering about her barrenness. Mehta expresses concern about circumstances where infertility is alluded to the woman fallaciously and wilfully to insulate the man from the ignominy of sterility, which is a trend prevalent in India. Laxmi is erroneously blamed for infertility. Incessant pestering from Vinod's mother pushes Laxmi under rigorous psychic strain, prompting her to commit suicide to save her husband if it suicide be. The mother-in-law prevents anyone from bursting open the door to save Laxmi from the flares before "the garland of flames... embraced her body" (78). Three hours after the injury, they called a doctor specialist to the place. "But can a doctor revive a half-cooked corpse with no skin to speak of?" (78). Laxmi's pathetic and desperate narrative is not just about her own agony but also about the tribulations of innumerable Indians, whose plight titillates the playwright's empathy and makes her feel obligated to confront domestic violence.

Mehta is persistent in her indictment of state officials' negligence. She employs Malini, her spokeswoman, in order to stand up the government's callous attitude toward its civilians. Malini's impediment to the government's silence in her sister's case boosts her resolve to resist discriminatory political adherence. She says Anil: "I've come to the conclusion that the weakness of democracies is that they move too slowly in the right direction" (21). Malini taunts the judiciary's verdict of her sister's death as an accident: "They decided Laxmi's sari

was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident" (15). She derides the bench that flops to bring fair justice: "I spit on your law courts! Playthings in the hands of the exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor" (18). She is hell-bent on ensuring Laxmi's husband and in-laws get punished and are seeking retribution for her sister's murder. She succeeds in exposing the bare facts of her sister's death to an extent, but she cannot get closure as no one is there to help in her endeavour. Through Malini, the play illustrates the commoner's annoyance with the judicial system. Malini, in hope of a more pleasing future says: "...one road still beckons: I will educate myself all I can. There is no future that can be denied me" (94).

Brides Are Not for Burning raises concerns about the social order and stereotypes that put women in subservient positions. Tarla, Laxmi's next-door neighbour, testifies falsely at the trial to defend Laxmi's in-laws, who had offered her husband a career. Despite her love for Laxmi, she tells a lie and testifies in prosecution in favour of an incident. Recapping Tarla of her husband's rage if he misses his job, the mother-in-law says, "You are just a doll of flesh for him to play with ..." (62). Knowing how powerless and dependent Tarla is, she scares her into silence by fearing what would happen if Tarla reveals the truth:

MOTHER-IN-LAW. ... Will that young head of yours be smashed against the wall like a coconut offered to Sri Ganesh? Or will that soft red lying mouth become bloody pulp at the hands of the butcher you are yoked to for life? (65-69)

Another inexplicable question linked to vehemence is the stillness or capitulating to harassment by men as well as women. Even after Laxmi is burnt to death in *Brides Are Not for Burning*, her father and brother Anil's frame of mind remains unaffected. Malini, Laxmi's sister, strives to unravel the mystery behind her sister's suicide, but she receives no back support from her family. Anil wishes to hush up Malini because his economic position prevents him from prosecuting the case legally, and he lacks the resources to facilitate Malini in gathering evidence as he has a professional journey ahead of him. Anil, Laxmi's brother, is altruistic and quixotic, while Malini is devoted to the Marxist paradigm and takes up her resistance to the male supremacy.

Brides Are Not for Burning is an embodiment of the apparent assault on copious cases avowed in Indian culture, including vehemence upon women in the patriarchal system. Malini is perceived as an embodiment of resistance. By the end of the play, Anil supports Malini in her crusade to unlock the riddle around Laxmi's suicide. He remarks: "Yes, a new inquest will certainly bring out new flaws, little breaches of the law that were overlooked, little erosion of truth" (62). Anil, who impersonates male promotion toward dowry, seizes the credit in the play adjacent to Malini. Though he is initially submissive, he ultimately says the play's terminal line: "The brides are not for burning!" Not as a sacrificial offering to the gods of avarice and greed" (63).

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