

# The Terra-Incognita of Power Dynamics: Interrogating Masculinity and Hypermasculinity in Dina Mehta's *'Brides Are Not for Burning'*

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**Abstract** The present paper studies Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1993), which investigates the issue of women's subjugation and makes an integral part of the canon of Indian feminist and reformist theatre. Scholars such as Elizabeth Jackson and Laxmi Subramanyam highlight the resistance Indian playwrights offer to oppressive patriarchal traditions. Mehta further interrogates the underlying root causes of this subjugation institutionalized through stereotypes of gender performance and sexuality. The present paper reads closely the play and analyses how Dina Mehta examines masculinity, hypermasculinity, and the social stereotypes about male sexuality in the play, which generates an argument around the power dynamics in Indian society. The paper establishes that Mehta questions the reinforcing role of male sexuality in the subjugation of women through the performance of gender roles (Butler, 1988). The play, thus, initiates a discourse on the dual standards of society on the sexual issues of male and female genders.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The post-independence Indian drama is an amalgamation of the streams of turbulent projections of the complexities of the urban middle-class society. The playwrights of this era emphasized the social ills that have been permeating society for several centuries. Significantly, the representation of women's subjugation has been a leitmotif in the corpus of post-Independence dramatic literature. Playwrights such as Upendranath Ashk (1910-96), Mohan Rakesh (1925- 72), Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), and Girish Karnad (1938-2019) are renowned as stalwarts of post- independence Indian drama. Their works highlighted women's precarious conditions and other pertinent issues of the urban middle class. Ashk, in his *Anjo Didi* (1953-54), sketched women characters operating of their free will. In his *Adhe Adhure* (1969), Rakesh highlighted the contrasts in power dynamics when a woman became the bread-earner for her family. Similarly, Tendulkar flayed open the dual standards of middle-class society in defining an independent man and a woman in his *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe!* (1967), while Karnad used mythological legends to put forth the social position of women in contemporary society as in his *Hayavadana* (1971) and *Nagamandala* (1988). On the other hand, Women dramatists such as Snehalata Reddy (1932-1977) and Mallika Sarabhai (b. 1954) contested the mythical representations of women that compared them with goddesses and, thus, idolized and dehumanized them in the process. Reddy's play *Sita* (1950) challenged the self-effacing figure of the mythological heroine who performed

the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. Instead, Reddy's Sita rejected her husband, Rama, who had ordered Sita to go through the trial of fire. Similarly, Sarabhai's play *In Search of the Goddess* contested the established notion of Savitri (a mythological character who challenged the God of death, Yamaraja, to save her husband's life) and redefined it from a feminist perspective. As Anita Singh notes; Her Savitri calls those men who worship her – and burn widows at their dead husband's funeral pyres – liars and manipulators. Goddesses were created to suit the necessity of the patriarchal politics. (Singh, 2019). Vasudha Dalmia notes that in the 1990s, directors such as Kirti Jain, Maya Rao, Anamika Haksar, and Amal Allana brought out impressive productions inspired by the agendas of the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association, founded in 1943). Also, playwrights such as Manjula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran, Poile Sengupta, and Dina Mehta presented the stories of women from a perspective that was not achievable by their male counterparts. Their plays, such as *Lights Out* and *Harvest* (written by Padmanabhan) and *Sons Must Die* (by Parameswaran), presented the inside views of their struggles and sufferings that were hitherto not achieved. While adhering to the question of resistance, the present paper explores such paradigms of social performances that are taken for granted and seldom brought to open discussion. Dina Mehta's play *Brides are Not for Burning* presents the perspective of the protagonist on the death of her sister. It also questions the premises of her death. The play exposes the masculine supremacy created by gender performance and the sacrosanctity of male sexuality. The play challenges the patriarchal hegemony

over the failure of a couple to reproduce. The paper explores Mehta's questioning of gender performance in maintaining this hegemony. It highlights the practice of concealing male infertility to safeguard the family's honour that instead makes the woman the culprit – by deeming her barren. By examining the performance of gender in marital relationships, especially in strained circumstances, the play emphasizes the silence and insignificant outlook of Indian society towards domestic violence and dowry deaths.

## 2 UNDERSTANDING MASCULINITY, HYPER-MASCULINITY, AND MALE-INFERTILITY IN DINA MEHTA'S *BRIDES ARE NOT FOR BURNING*

*Brides Are Not For Burning* was first published in 1993 and has been renowned for its questioning of the dominant subjugation of women. The play got Mehta the BBC Playwright of the Year award in 1997 when it was aired as a radio play. The plot of the play revolves around Laxmi and her sister Malini. Laxmi is a victim of dowry death and is never present on stage. Malini, a college student who dreams of becoming a lawyer, takes it upon herself to investigate her sister's death which was declared an accident by the coroner. The play presents a sharp reflection of Indian society from the victim's perspective. It presents the illegal and yet prevalent system of dowries in Indian marriages, an unfulfillment of which makes the bride a subject of physical and mental violence, often leading to their death. The paper, however, circumvents the broader discussions on resistance against patriarchy, for discussions such as these have been undertaken with critical attention in many scholarly works such as Laxmi Subramaniam's *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* (2002), Diana Dimitrova's *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama* (2008), and Elizabeth Jackson's *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing* (2010). Instead, the paper focuses on the less emphasized themes of the play, viz., masculine dominance, hypermasculinity, and male sexuality. It examines how male infertility is disguised under aggressive hyper-masculine acts. However, before attempting any answer, the paper distinguishes between the study's premises – masculinity, hyper-masculinity, and patriarchy and how they are exhibited in the play.

"Masculinity refers to the socially produced but embodied ways of being male," writes Sanjay Srivastava in his article *Masculinity Studies and Feminism: Othering the Self*. While "Patriarchy," he says, "refers to a system of social life that is premised on the idea of the superiority of all men to women" (Srivastava, 2015). This superiority exhibits itself through almost all the male characters in the play. In the opening scenes of the play, Mehta establishes the expected gender roles for women through Malini's father's nostalgic reminiscence about her curvy "goddess" mother. He says:

**Father:** [...] It worries me, though, that she has no children. After five years! You were all born in the first five years of marriage [...].

**Malini:** A pity you had not heard of contraceptives, Father!

**Father:** Her hips were wide, some women are made for child-bearing [...] unlike poor Sujata, whom I sent back to her parents after ten years. [...] but your mother was curved like a goddess [...] (Mehta, 13- 14)

The general objectification of the female gender as "child-bearing" machines is a common social construct requiring repetition of the act (in marriage) to accomplish the label of an ideal woman. According to Judith Butler, one is not born a woman but performs a woman. The performance here is the repeated act of bearing children. Butler notes in her article, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*;

"... gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." (Butler, 1988)

Contrastingly, masculinity includes the "socially produced" ways of staying male. Nonetheless, when performed for superiority and dominance, these ways become hypermasculine acts. For instance, in the first act, Malini's Father reminisces about how Laxmi's in-laws made a show of their wealth. The act performed by Vinod's (Laxmi's husband) uncle is described by Father:

**Father:** [...] That time when Vinod's uncle flung 100-rupee notes at my feet because they wanted all those extra guests to be fed at the wedding... that was the time to have called off the whole thing. But I swallowed even that insult. (Mehta, 14)

Flinging currency notes in marriages is one of many acts that the groom's side performs to establish masculine dominance in Indian weddings. Matt C. Zaitchik and Donald L. Mosher define this escalated dominance level as hypermasculinity. They write in their article *Criminal Justice Implications of the Macho Personality Constellation*; hypermasculinity consists of exaggerated macho male acts that are based on some interrelated beliefs that include;

"... (a) the view of violence as manly, (b) the view of danger as exciting, and (c) calloused sex attitudes towards women. "Violence as manly" identifies the macho man's attitude that aggression – verbal or physical – is an acceptable expression of dominance over other men. "Danger as exciting" reflects the attitude that survival in dangerous situations is a display of man's dominance over the environment. "Calloused sex attitudes" reflects the belief that sexual intercourse can be equated with sexual dominance over women, establishing both his masculine power and the submission of women..." (Zaitchik and Mosher, 1984)

In Laxmi's Father's case, it is the first belief that his daughter's in-laws exhibit. These acts, as Father suggests, are intended to cause insult.

As the play proceeds, two significant characters with inherently opposite and equally trenchant wits are introduced. Anil, Malini's brother, is a twenty-two-year-old teacher who teaches history at a school and Roy, the anarchist, believes that mass genocide is the only way towards an equal and just world. Mehta presents Anil as a rational and sensitive male who does not impose his thoughts on others, especially when displaying his sharp intelligence. On the contrary, Roy immediately establishes himself as a dominant male misled by a false notion of superiority and by his idea of revolution. He performs the macho masculine act by denying his wife Gita's choice of having a child as he believes it is "not the right time to breed."

**Malini:** At a...! I don't believe you. You mean she decided to – to get rid of it?

**Roy:** No. I did.

**Malini:** Roy, you know how much she wanted that baby –

**Roy:** I had warned her. This is not the right time for breeding. She thought she could get away with it. *A fait accompli*, as they say in French – (Mehta, 27-28)

Roy's act of deciding the abortion highlights two critical aspects. First, the woman's right to choose

when to have a baby (in this case) is controlled directly by the man; second, she is not given absolute autonomy over her body and its needs; it depends on the husband's will, and thus proves Zaitchik and Mosher's idea of the "calloused sex attitudes" as hypermasculine.

Roy's performance of hypermasculinity does not stop at subjugating the choices of his wife. He questions Malini's choice to dress up for an outing only a few days after her sister's death. He continues in a similar vein;

**Roy:** [...] You think Sanjay will ever marry a girl like you?

**Malini:** Why not?

**Roy:** [...] He will throw you crumbs from his table like you scatter feed corn for chicken. Or small change to a beggar.

**Malini:** I am no beggar!

**Roy:** No. You are a whore. Had I known it earlier, I would have taken you myself [...]  
(Mehta, 28)

Roy's act proves that for hypermasculine men, sexual intercourse with a woman can be equated with sexual dominance over her. This episode changes Malini's perspective, and she can see through Roy's schemes of revolution and finds that behind the facade of a revolutionary is a chauvinist who only wants authority and control:

**Roy:** Malini, [urgently] you can't go back: go forward! Don't dream: act!

**Malini:** I will. I am late for my date... Perhaps women will stay at home every night after the revolution? (Mehta, 29)

A significant proportion of the hypermasculine acts is performed by another of the absent characters, Suresh Gadgil. He is Vinod's neighbour and Tarla's (Laxmi's friend) husband. He is a short-tempered, foul-mouth drunkard who was suspended by Malini's boyfriend, Sanjay. He is reinstated to work a few days after Laxmi's death at Vinod's behest. The lack of context makes Vinod's act appear "an errand of mercy" (Mehta, 47) to Sanjay. Performing this errand of mercy makes Vinod superior to Gadgil. As Srivastava notes, "Masculinity... is not only a relationship between men and women but also between men" (Srivastava, 2015). Malini, nevertheless, understands this act as a "smooth wall of deception" (Mehta, 48) created to manipulate the

investigation. We observe the fear of violence aroused in a woman merely by the mention of the name of the perpetrator. Laxmi's mother-in-law uses Gadgil's name to threaten Tarla, whom she constantly spies on and catches her talking to Malini.

**Mother-in-law:** You think you can knife us in the back and get away with it? [...]

**Tarla:** [in terror] No no!

**Mother-in-law:** [...] You are just a doll of flesh for him to play with – and you would betray us? [...] What will happen, do you think, when I tell him? When he knows? 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? (Mehta, 72)

Tarla, akin to Laxmi, is a victim of dual suppression – a subaltern. Firstly, from the violence caused by her husband, and secondly, from the patriarchal oppression at the hands of an older woman. The female gender, in this case, performs in two distinct manners; in Tarla – as the subservient female, and in the Mother-in-law – as an oppressive female who has assimilated the patriarchal codes within her. Tarla's oppression by the Mother-in-law reflects the case of women in Indian societies who succumb to masculine dominance and gradually become the perpetrators. Tarla is dragged into the repercussions of Laxmi's death by a mother figure, who, despite knowing the "butcher" in Tarla's husband, chooses to threaten her with hypermasculine violence.

### 3 EXPLORING THE TERRA-INCOGNITA: MALE SEXUALITY AND ITS ROLE IN REINFORCING PATRIARCHY

A striking question that Mehta asks about masculinity and masculine dominance is about the unchallengeable status of male sexuality. Laxmi's death, besides dowry taunts, is a result of the harassment for not being able to bear a child after five years of marriage. No one raises similar questions for Vinod except Malini:

**Malini:** She was never the one to complain. I would have known nothing but for Tarla

**Anil:** [...] As the only neighbour on the scene of the tragedy her testimony was

vital, but she did not have much to say at the inquest today.

**Malini:** Perhaps she was scared to! She knew how they picked on Laxmi because in the five years there had been no children – as if Vinod couldn't be at fault there [...] (Mehta, 17)

It is the first instance in the play that challenges the for- granted status of male sexuality. Mehta uses it to highlight the lack of open discourse around a topic still considered taboo for open discussions. The reason for our inhibitions to discuss male sexuality, again, lies in the superiority of masculinity. Srivastava writes;

"[...] Here the honour of community becomes coeval with that of men, and while both men and women might be punished for disobeying honour codes, it is women who bear the greatest burden – sometime with tragic consequences of upholding community honour." (Srivastava, 2015)

In Laxmi's case, the burden of upholding the honour (of her family) leads to incessant taunts and eventually leads to her death. Through the play, Mehta brings to light the custom of labelling women as barren irrespective of the fact that the same can also be true for men. Vinod's impotence is kept hidden for most of the play, and we are only made aware of it through the dialogue between Arjun, Vinod's brother, and his mother (Laxmi's Mother-in-law).

**Arjun:** I'm not a ch-child anymore. What – what right has Vinod to bully me, the – the eunuch!

**Mother-in-law:** [slapping him] Such a word you speak in my presence! For my grey hair you have no respect?

**Arjun:** It's the truth!... That's what he is, your Vinod. Eunuch... Why did he play the endless farce of dragging Laxmi Bhabhi from one holy man to another? Vinod couldn't father a child if you b-bought him ten wives and pushed him into bed with each one in turn [...]

**Arjun:** He bosses everyone like a gangster! But you think I don't know the doctors have found him without sp-sperm? You think I don't know about the doctors and the tests and all the medicines he's tried – allopathic, ayurvedic, ho-homeopathic – (Mehta, 80-81)

The above conversation opens more debates than are visible in the play. Why do we find any discussion on



male sexuality and its problems so difficult? Even with the closest of people we know. The answer to it is as complex as the problem because it again involves gender performance and masculine superiority. Vinod, culturally trained to perform masculinity (precisely, strength and authority), cannot accept weakness, while Laxmi, trained to perform submissiveness, cannot practice authority (by leaving her infertile husband) and, thus, has to perform submissiveness by compromising the situation to protect the family's honour.

The situation is more challenging because Laxmi is unaware of her husband's impotence; thus, even choosing to stay with Vinod (on the sheer premise of love) is taken from her. Malini says that "she was never the one to complain" (Mehta, 16) and hence follows her husband's and mother-in-law's commands without questioning. For the sake of counter-perspective, one can say that she stayed for the money and the status of the Marfatia family, but that choice is also not available to her as she cannot ask for money in death. On the contrary, Malini tells Anil that Laxmi's in-laws had her insured for a large sum, making Laxmi's death a dowry death case. As established from the dialogue:

**Malini:** [...] Last year, 350 women died of burns in this city alone, some of them over-insured wives.

**Anil:** What are you trying to say?

**Malini:** And when they died – plucked in their bloom by fiery fingers – the husband's family came into a lot of money.

**Anil:** For God's sake, the Marfatia family is in no need of money. And we don't even know if Laxmi was insured.

**Malini:** We do, as a matter of fact. Early this year. Laxmi told me herself. (Mehta, 15-16)

Thus, the contradiction that Laxmi might have chosen to stay for materialistic benefits gets debunked by Malini, who also establishes the Marfatia family's quest for authority and power even over Laxmi's death.

The reinforcement of masculine superiority comes from Vinod's pushing Laxmi to perform asinine rituals and his family's taunts. While both (if only they should) should feel the burden of not having offspring, only Laxmi suffers. Her unawareness of Vinod's sterility and the family's taunts push her towards the threshold of despondency. The futility of performing rituals leads her to think she is barren. If

only it could be called so, her death is an epiphenomenon of gender performance. Malini elaborates and proves it clearly when she says;

**Malini:** [...] The sexual act may be an act of conquest for the man, of surrender for the woman... But what I wanted most out of life was to know myself half of a true pair, certain of its integrity... This is the only way I know of overcoming loneliness... (Mehta, 86)

Thus, Laxmi is the victim of a social system that does not give women the tools to fight oppression and lead a life of their choice. She has to bear the consequences of the dual standards set by social norms that treat women as the culprit and deems her barren even when her husband is sterile. Laxmi's death asks profound questions about why society coerces women into rituals and ordeals that bring them no results but exhaustion and more embarrassment instead of discussing male infertility.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The play *Brides Are Not For Burning* by Dina Mehta is a significant milestone in Indian feminist theatre. The play takes up and emphatically presents the burning issue of dowry deaths, which is still a horrifying reality in both rural and urban Indian societies. The present paper studies and analyses Mehta's portrayal of dowry deaths through the perspective of gender performance. The paper examines Mehta's questioning of masculinity, hypermasculinity, and patriarchal dominance and finds that she challenges the established stereotypes about marital life and foregrounds the taboo topic of male sexuality.

The paper introduces the contribution of women artists and directors since the foundation of IPTA in the post-independence Indian theatre tradition. The paper reports that scholarly debates around these playwrights, such as in the works of Diana Dimitrova, Vasudha Dalmia, and Laxmi Subramanyam, discuss the resistance to patriarchy. However, it points out that in her present play, Mehta goes beyond resisting and challenges the root causes of this subjugation – masculinity and hypermasculinity.

The paper describes and problematizes the concepts of masculinity, hypermasculinity, and patriarchy. Sanjay Srivastava and Zaitchik and Mosher define masculinity as the "socially produced ways of staying male", hypermasculinity as the inter-related beliefs of staying dominant, dangerous, and having a calloused

attitude towards women, and patriarchy as the system of producing and sustaining the superiority of males. These definitions constitute the paper's argument that the association of infertility with the woman in a marriage is a function of gender performance.

Further, the paper studies and analyzes the instances in the play where the paradigms of male dominance are exhibited by the characters. The paper studies the gender performances of both the male and female genders in the play and finds that it plays a pivotal role in leading to the death of the protagonist Laxmi. The paper also carefully establishes the reciprocal relationship between the performance of feminine submissiveness and masculine supremacy by studying the performance of several characters.

The paper then studies the functioning of male sexuality in the play. It reports Mehta's questioning of the sacrosanct status of male sexuality in Indian society and explores Laxmi's repercussions when her male partner is infertile. The paper finds that the for-granted nature of male sexuality also results from gender performance. The paper establishes that Laxmi's death is a consequence of the performance of gender and patriarchal oppression that push her first to commit suicide.

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