
The Perspectives of Marginalised Narratives in Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* and *Getting Away with Murder*

Meenu Sambharia,

Research Scholar (Department of English) Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak

Corresponding Author: **Dr. Surender Singh**, Assistant Professor (Department of English) Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak

Paper Received on 14-04-2025, Accepted on 17-05-2025

Published on 18-05-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.2.287

Abstract

Throughout history, women in society have often been regarded as "others," lacking a venue to express their thoughts and feelings. Men often impose their authority on women, marginalising them in social, economic, political, and religious spheres. The patriarchal system infringes upon their rights, subjecting them to persecution from their environment, which in turn denies them access to education, prevailing authorities, and essential services. Their voices remain unrecognised, and they are unable to articulate their legitimate concerns. This study explores the marginalised viewpoints in the writings of Indian feminist playwright Dina Mehta, with a focus on her works '*Brides are not for Burning*' and '*Getting Away with Murder*'. Throughout the plays, it becomes evident that men bear the responsibility for the unfortunate plight of women. In both plays, male characters profoundly impact the lives of women, inflicting both physical and psychological harm, thereby rendering them subaltern. The research examines the dire physical and psychological circumstances surrounding exploitation.

Keywords: persecution, legitimate, subaltern, psychological, feminist, patriarchal

Children in India used to fall asleep while listening to bedtime tales recounted by their grandparents and other elderly relatives. Most of the stories revolved around a lady who was kidnapped by demons, left behind by her in-laws' family, contemplated suicide, encountered a curse that caused her to turn to stone, and was ultimately rescued by a man. The tales of Ahilya, Sita, and Draupadi teach us about shame. These stories stick with kids because their imaginations are so malleable.

They internalise the idea that this is what it means to be a woman, seeing the attack on her body as a natural part of who she is. It creates the sense that women are destined for suffering. Without question or protest, women embrace all these traditions.

Pillai Vedanayakam articulates, "Even if you scold her and beat her every day, she will be worshipful and say your hands will hurt, beating her. She will never leave you. She is like a faultless pearl" (1-3). Dina Mehta is a leading writer on women's issues. She dealt with the themes of dehumanisation, tyranny, and subordination sensitively as a dramatist. Subjects like female genital mutilation, child abuse, rape, bride burning, gender prejudice, sexual discrimination, and sexual assault are prominent in her literature. She adeptly orchestrated the emotive power and reinterpreted the voices of oppressed women who have persevered throughout history. In a compelling act of defiance against exploitation and brutality, she adeptly brings the female characters to life.

Both "*Brides Are Not for Burning*" and "*Getting Away with Murder*" feature female protagonists who experience the repression of their voices due to patriarchal attitudes and practices. The subaltern is embodied by Dina Mehta, who vigorously develops the female roles. She thinks male dramatists aren't as adept at reading women's minds as female dramatists. Because she knows firsthand the suffering that women endure, she writes with the hope of providing a healing touch to those women in society. To bring attention to the male dominance over women, she actively opposes the current situation by protesting. As the voice of the women's movement, she criticises and seeks to change societal structures through her plays.

Subaltern refers to a person's position at the bottom of a social, governmental, or other hierarchy. The term genuinely refers to the dispossessed individuals. Anyone who is oppressed, marginalised, and unable to speak up about their struggles is considered a subaltern. Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist thinker from Italy, used the word "subaltern" to describe a social category that was both marginalised and denied basic human rights. We may gain a more profound understanding of the issues facing the impoverished, lower-class peasants, marginalised, and referred to as others by analysing Gramsci's Subaltern. Gramsci articulates, "Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense". Gayatri Spivak's piece, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* elucidates the diverse connotations of the word within the context of Indian postcolonial scholarship. She argues that the postcolonial social structure prevents marginalised people from speaking up. They are unable to articulate their concerns; they are incapable of advocating for their rights. Women in the postcolonial age struggle to contest

prevailing structures due to their oppression by both colonialism and patriarchy. Homi Bhabha characterises the subaltern as a group of marginalised and oppressed individuals. The absence of abilities necessary to articulate their legitimate assertions stifles their voices. As a result, the prevailing societal system disregards their voices.

The title of the play '*Brides are not for Burning*' is profoundly relevant and is a heartfelt expression from women. The author's earnest appeal to the patriarchy asserts that brides should not undergo immolation. In Hindu tradition and culture, dowry has been a longstanding norm throughout history. Domestic abuse affects brides in several regions of India. The spouse and in-laws perpetrated their demise for the sake of dowry or other possessions of value. Dina Mehta exhibited a profound awareness of societal issues, bringing to the forefront the grave matter of a bride burning through her play, which debuted in 1979. The BBC hosted an international playwriting competition and awarded the play the highest honour. The BBC transmitted it from London through their World Service, and All India Radio subsequently adopted a similar approach. Madras, Bangalore, and Bombay also hosted performances of the drama. Dina Mehta's play underscores the patriarchal framework and reveals the internal conflicts of the female characters. The female characters desired to express themselves, while the males surrounding them consistently silenced their opinions.

The figures of Laxmi, Malini, Tarla, Sujata, and Gita embody the subalterns in "*Brides Are Not for Burning*." Dina Mehta not only illustrated physical enslavement but also crafted psychological realism, revealing the complexities of many female characters' subjectivities. The initial scene poignantly depicts the profound emotional distress endured by the family members of the victim. The father has devoted his entire existence to accumulating resources to fulfil the expectations set by his daughter's in-laws, all in the pursuit of improving his daughter's quality of life. He states, "Marriage is 12 tolas of gold, 2,000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of silk... Their expectations were endless" (Mehta 13).

Both her parents' influences and her in-laws' behaviour affected Laxmi. Despite her exceptional intelligence, being the oldest child in the family forced her to take on the role of carer for her siblings, which limited her access to school and essential resources. She put her younger siblings' pleasure ahead of her own, and she keeps quiet about any complaints pertaining to the family. Entering matrimony with a businessman, instead of enhancing her situation, intensifies her challenges as her in-laws relentlessly impose expectations upon her parents. They subjected her to anguish and humiliation because of the inadequacy of the dowry she provided, which did not meet their expectations. Laxmi's sister-in-law consistently remarked about her,

stating, "A goddess of wealth had entered their home with clothes fit for a servant and jewels not worth the name" (Mehta 16).

She is ensnared in a predicament that she cannot endure for an extended period; her joy transforms into searing anguish, ultimately leading her to contemplate suicide. Laxmi's in-laws also sought to benefit from the insurance payout following her demise. Laxmi was perpetually accused of her impotence; all members of her in-laws' family tormented her for not bearing children while concealing Vinod's sterility. However, Arjun's remarks about Vinod reveal the truth to the public. He addresses his mother, "Vinod couldn't father a child if you bought him ten wives and pushed him into bed.... doctor have found him without sperm" (Mehta 81). Anguish filled Laxmi's heart, yet she endured these torments without protest, having been conditioned from a young age to believe that women need to embody the perfect wife and remain silent sufferers. Her in-laws instilled such ideals in Laxmi, taking advantage of her naivety.

They exploited her for financial gain and domestic goods, ultimately prompting her to make the tragic decision to take her own life through self-immolation, rendering her a victim of dowry death. Neither family considered her thoughts, and her voice persisted entirely stifled. Sujata was an object of patriarchy and endured her suffering in silence. Upon marriage, she fulfils the essential roles of servant, wife, nurse, and caretaker. She likewise discreetly confronted all the adversities imposed by her spouse. She has experienced six miscarriages over the course of ten years. She exhibited much obedience and submissiveness. Her spouse returned her to her parents' residence without any wrongdoing on her part. The instances demonstrate the psychological and physical exploitation endured by the ladies. The social hierarchy denies individuals the chance to voice their opinions or receive attention.

Malini is the sole female character that advocates for truth and opposes violence. She differed from Laxmi, who endured many forms of maltreatment. She elevated her expression upon hearing the court's ruling regarding her sister's demise since she harboured suspicions about the information. She believed it was not a suicide, but rather a premeditated killing. She sought to uncover the motivations behind her sister's actions. She attempted to persuade her brother Anil to assist her in uncovering the truth, using the statistic that "last year, 350 women died from burns in the city alone, some of whom were overinsured spouses" (Mehta 14). She is utterly exasperated with the law enforcement system, which has unsuccessful to provide justice for her sister.

Furthermore, she demands accountability from the media and newspapers for their role in obscuring the truth surrounding her sister's demise and categorising the

event as merely an accident. She stated, "I spit on your law courts, playthings in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor" (Mehta 18). Malini emerges as the most transformative character in the drama; however, she finds herself ensnared by the constraints of patriarchy, ultimately becoming a member of the subaltern class. A person close to her skilfully dominated her. She arose as a vocal representative for women within society, striving to transform the conventional perceptions of femininity, though her efforts ultimately did not yield the desired results. She is enamoured with Sanjay and desires to marry him; but, upon her proposal, he expressed that he is under familial pressure to wed a woman from an appropriate lineage. Sanjay responded unfavourably, but he proposed employment as his secretary to facilitate a future sexual connection.

It illustrates the masculine mindset of using the female body for personal gratification, disregarding her feelings and emotions. She is also exasperated by her support for Roy, who was implicated in the illegal and disruptive operations, as she backed him while opposing the established system. Anil sought to alter her decision over her lack of support for Roy, although she never listened to him. Ultimately, she discovered that Roy had abandoned his wife, Gita, and used her for his advantage, potentially abandoning her at any moment. She resolved to leave him; however, he compelled her to accompany him. The masculine dominance is evident in the subsequent dialogues: "Malini: You are hurting my arm. Roy: It is meant to hurt. Why don't you cry out? Why don't you scream? I've never heard you scream, Malini" (Mehta 93).

She endured emotional and physical suffering, ultimately resulting in her isolation and alienation. She perceives both her boyfriends as hypocrites, confronting disappointment in her relationships with them. Tarala, like Laxmi, embodies the docile female archetype, having submitted to male dominance. She harbours a deep affection for Laxmi and has consistently desired to help her; nonetheless, she acquiesces to male domination and conceals the truth behind her friend's demise. She stated, "My husband will be furious if he finds out I've been talking about it..." (Mehta 68). It demonstrates that males in society perceive females as mere puppets, treating them as objects and rendering them subaltern. They compel them to articulate just what they wish to hear.

Tarala demonstrates a certain acquiescence because of the support extended by the Marfatia family during her husband's period of unemployment and the prevailing scarcity of food within the household. Gita, a woman of Bengali heritage and the spouse of Roy, likewise experienced the suffering of her husband. The drama solely conveys Gita's presence through the exchanges between Malini and Roy. She

has no authority to undertake any actions or to create anything independently. She is an acquaintance of Malini and maintained an effective connection with her. She wished to see Malini; however, she was unwell due to having undergone an abortion. She already had three children and was expecting a fourth. Gita harboured a profound longing for the child; however, her husband, Roy, exerted pressure on her to end the pregnancy. He articulated, "This is not a suitable time to have a child" (72). Roy decides to abandon her and send her back to her parents' house at the end of the play. It suggests that Indian women of the 20th century follow their husbands' instructions without question. By exploring the intricacies of the female mind and illuminating the psychological conflicts of the female characters in *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Dina Mehta aims to draw attention to the important problem of dowry death. She explains the profound and complex psychological impacts of abuse on women, which are deeply ingrained and difficult to comprehend and overcome.

The drama '*Getting Away with Murder*' exemplifies the intricate subjugation of women within a patriarchal framework. Women from diverse backgrounds, encompassing various classes, races, and religions, face analogous challenges. They endure both physical and psychological subjugation, representing the marginalised voices of society. Dina Mehta's play '*Getting Away with Murder*' delves into several deep-rooted topics, such as rape, female feticide, childhood sexual abuse, professional harassment, and unstable relationships. Women frequently submit to this structure, showing a propensity to comply without protest. The playwright has presented four female protagonists hailing from varied backgrounds, yet each finds herself ensnared by the constraints of a patriarchal societal structure.

The main protagonists of the drama are Raziya, Mallika, and Sonali. Everyone has been traumatised emotionally, mentally, and physically. The performance began with a stranger harassing Mallika with sexually suggestive remarks and attempting to exploit her for his sex. The incident exemplifies the masculine perspective on women, highlighting their frequent disregard and exploitation for men's purposes. Mallika is a contemporary, audacious, self-assured, and resolute individual who has endured several harrowing experiences throughout her life. Her male colleague advised her to pursue secretarial or public relations tasks. She is effective in her work, managing the entire office, consistently taking the lead, and surpassing him. She was enamoured with Gopal and desired to marry him; however, he frequently neglected her calls and engaged in sexual encounters with other women. The dialogue among Mallika and Gopal illustrates the precarious nature of their relationship, as Mallika states, "Liar! That's why you couldn't face me these

last few days. You were scared you'd whisper the wrong name in the wrong ear in the dark" (Mehta 82).

Sonali is a notable figure. As a youngster, she suffered sexual abuse. Her uncle Narotam began sexually abusing her in her bedroom every night when she was eight years old. He consistently seizes any opportunity to make physical contact with her, often positioning himself outside her bathroom to observe her unclothed. He intimidates her and renders her mute. The traumatic events of her upbringing profoundly shattered her, and she continues to endure the repercussions of that cruelty even after her marriage. Frequently, she loses her composure and acts like an eight-year-old, revealing her nervousness and dread. Incidents of childhood sexual abuse inflict profound and enduring effects on her psyche. When she found out she was pregnant, she suggested that Mallika get Raziya tested for sex determination. She stated, "If it's a girl I shall abort her" (Mehta 62). Despite being a woman, she supports female feticide due to her past painful experiences. She remarked, "To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude!" (Mehta 63).

Raziya is a prosperous gynecologist who specialises in obstetrics, although she is unable to have a child of her own. Despite her education and profession as a physician, she upholds the harsh traditions of society. She stated, "I'm that joke of nature-a barren woman" (Mehta 77). Because she recognises her weakness and accepts the situation, she does not react to her husband's and his mother's adulterous behaviour. Habib, her husband, gives in to his mother's influence and wants to wed Zamana. Raziya fully submits to the androcentric worldview by accepting the truth and deciding to become his primary wife. Mallika's office stenographer, Thelma, is the target of harassment at work. Mallika's companion, Mr. Pinglay, often made offensive comments and gestures around Thelma.

To write a message, he calls her to his cabin and suggests that she take him to a hotel far from the city. When everyone else has left the office, he forces her to stay. He claims that he wants to maintain a relationship with his elderly wife. Males often resort to blackmail against women to satisfy their sexual cravings. When he discovered Thelma making long-distance calls from the office phone, he intended to take similar action against her. Thelma has endured this torment since last February but ultimately resolved to quit her position and informed Mallika. Mallika liberates her from this torment and permits her to resume her duties at the workplace.

This article examines the exploitation and subordination of women in a patriarchal society. In both plays, the female leads face various forms of manipulation. They suffer from emotional and psychological anguish in addition to physical repression. In her plays, Dina Mehta tries to express the viewpoints of the oppressed.

She has portrayed submissive characters that completely submit to the androcentric social order, such as Laxmi, Sujata, Gita, Thelma, Sonali, and Raziya. Laxmi is denied an education and used as a dowry by her in-laws; Tarala, Gita, and Sujata are oppressed by their husbands; Sonali is sexually abused as a child by her uncle; Raziya, a doctor, silently submits to male dominance; and Thelma experiences sexual harassment at work. The oppressive androcentric power structure of society, or a lack of power and ability for self-expression, entirely suppresses their voices. On the other hand, she presents characters like Mallika and Malini, who express their strong aversion to exploitation but who suffer from emotional and psychological suffering after being dumped by their relationships. Patriarchy and patriarchal ideology contribute to the perception of female characters as inferior and subaltern. In both plays, Dina Mehta's main goal is to highlight the various social elements that contribute to women's devaluation.

Works Cited

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography." *SAGE Publications Ltd eBooks*, 2003, pp. 191–204. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608238.n14>.
- Gramsci, Antonio. "Selections From the Prison Notebooks." *Routledge eBooks*, 2020, pp. 141–42. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-27>.
- Mehta, Dina. *Brides Are Not for Burning: A Play in Two Acts*. 1993.
- . *Getting Away with Murder. Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000.
- Pillai, Vētanāyakam. *The Life and Times of Pratapa Mudaliar*. Katha, 2005.
- Varma, Bhagyashree S. "Questioning the Dowry Deaths in India: Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. III, no. III, May 2013, www.galaxyimrj.com.