

Representation of Violence and Quest for Emancipation: A Reading of Dina Mehta's *Getting Away With Murder*

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Abstract

Women's theatre in India since 1970s focuses on the various issues and problems faced by women in the society and family. The women playwrights of this time represent in their works issues like domestic violence, bride-burning, exploitation of women's sexuality, molestation and exploitation of girl-child. Among the women playwrights writing in English, Dina Mehta is a pioneer. Her play *Getting Away with Murder* (1989) presents the troubled lives of three friends Mallika, Sonali and Raziya. In this play Mehta shows how the lives of these friends are anguished by violence in multifaceted ways. Patriarchy plays a crucial role in the agonised lives of these characters. Social evil like 'witch killing' is another important subject dealt in this play. In this paper I shall evaluate how violence and abuse affects the lives of the female characters, and how they struggle to achieve their emancipation from their troubled situations.

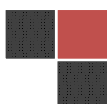
Keywords: violence, trauma, patriarchy, sexual abuse, emancipation.

The post-Independence Indian drama is largely concerned with the anxieties of the subjugated and marginalised individuals who struggle to combat hegemonic supremacies of the ruling class. The playwrights of this period have explored contemporary social themes and issues like familial conflict, personal difficulties and complex human relationships in their plays. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, complex gender issues, domestic violence, the predicament of women and sexual abuse of children are probed by many playwrights. Playwrights and directors such as Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Habib Tanvir and Mohan Rakesh have echoed through their plays the uneven sharing of authority and rights between the two genders. A new form of theatre—‘street theatre’ started to gain strength from early 1970s. This form of theatre was radical in approach and it experimented with the contemporary burning social issues of India. A group of Delhi radical theatre amateurs under the leadership of Safdar Hashmi formed Jana Natya Manch also known as ‘Janam’ in 1973 and sought to take theatre to the people. In 1979 ‘Janam’ performed an agitation propaganda street play *Aurat* which addressed problems like dowry harassment and domestic violence.

During the colonial period women were marginalised in the fields of playwriting, theatre production and management. Though this scenario gradually changed in the post-Independence period, most women playwrights still remained absent from the print medium. Tutun Mukherjee edited anthology *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005) is a pioneering book as for the first time in India it brings together eighteen unpublished plays of female playwrights translated to English from ten major Indian regional languages. In the introduction of this anthology, which is entitled as “Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre,” Tutun Mukherjee argues that while postcolonial Indian drama has become “more varied, rich and diverse both in content and semiotics,” it has still largely ignored “women’s experiences” (10). The women’s theatre narratives in India emerged in late 1970s as a reaction to the male dominated theatrical traditions of regional theatre. Indian feminist theatre cannot be considered to be restricted to any specific language or dramatic custom. As it continued to flourish, it brought into focus difficulties and problems of women in Indian society hitherto remain untouched in the writings of their male counterparts. With the growth of female discourses, authentic portrayal of woman occupied important spaces in female-centric plays; these discourses offered a truthful presentation of women’s predicament in the Indian society for the first time.

Tutun Mukherjee’s *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* validates the fact that Indian women playwrights are engaging themselves in the act of looking at social issues from women’s perspective. In “Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre” of this volume, Mukherjee states that “the denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to ‘vulgarise’ and ‘devalue’ oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and public space have all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presences in others” (4). Mukherjee also stresses that “theatre seems to reflect, like other cultural activities, an institutional structure in which artistic and administrative control still remains largely in the hands of men” (4).

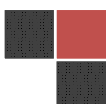
The women’s liberation activities in the 1960s and the 1970s helped in reviving the unseen female tradition in the area of theatrical writing. Regarding the emergence of Indian women’s theatre, Anita Singh writes in “Aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre”:



“Feminist theatre ... is revisionist in spirit and it questions orthodoxy. It questions – phallogocentrism: male-centred view of life. Phallogocentrism: male-dominated discourse. It is *avant-garde* movement, as it deconstructs and has many facets. It deconstructs patriarchal metaphysics” (155). Indu Pandey in “Female Playwrights and the Theatre in India: Challenges and Perspectives” analyses how feminist theatre in India helped in subverting the stereotyped images of women created on stage by male playwrights in the beginning: “The feminist theatre ... has given voice to the silence, reconstructed the traditional images of women and presented them on stage. They try to project sensitive issues concerning women in the play so as to spread feminine issues present in the Indian society” (47-48). Hence, the main purpose behind the reclamation of women’s theatre is actually to recreate, understand or become aware of the fact that women not only face suppression in their daily life but also in the field of literature where their works do not get due recognition. Defining women’s theatre, Tutun Mukherjee in *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* comments, “It is a politically nuanced theatre oriented towards change and produced by women with feminine concerns. It is a product of feminism and feminine awareness makes the shape of the play” (14). Lakshmi Subramanyam in *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* (2002) makes an analysis of the various characteristics of women’s theatre in India; she mentions that “an important strand of women’s theatre in India is its intervention in the areas which directly concerns women. Increasingly theatre has been seen as a useful means of foregrounding issues that are largely suppressed or considered non-existent by the mainstream theatre” (31).

The plays written in English during the last three decades of the twentieth century by the women playwrights like Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mallika Sarabhai, Poile Sengupta and Tripurari Sharma seek to review the patriarchal metaphysics by challenging ‘phallogocentrism’ of the contemporary Indian writings. In addition, they create a theatrical idiom of their own by crafting an altogether new kind of narrative in theatre. Helen Keyssar in her book *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (1996) states that Indian women’s theatre in late twentieth century presents “productions and scripts characterized by consciousness of women as women ... and the creation of women characters in the ‘subject position’” (9). Women’s theatre in India has evolved distinct styles to enable the exploration of untapped narratives of women’s lives which are marked by violence, discontinuities, fragments, randomness and surprises.

Among the women playwrights writing in English, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta and Manjula Padmanabhan, in particular, represent multidimensional layers of violence against women in their works. Dina Mehta in *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1979) and *Getting Away with Murder* (1989), Manjula Padmanabhan in *Lights Out* (1984), *Harvest* (1996) and *Hidden Fires* (2002), and Poile Sengupta in *Mangalam* (1993) deal with issues of domestic violence, bride-burning, exploitation of women’s sexuality, molestation and exploitation of girl-child. Women face violence and humiliation in many aspects of their daily lives. Violence is generally considered as a physical act and we often fail to recognise that it can also be psychological and emotional. The modes of violence against women are complex and varied and they leave deep, irreparable impacts on women psyche and cannot be overcome easily. C. S. Lakshmi in her introductory essay “And Kannagi Plucked Out a Breast” to *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (2000) explicates the sad reality of controlling a woman’s body and violence inflicted on it in our society:



The notion of controlling the female body, shaping, re-forming and rerouting its work, movement and space, is a constant and persistent one. It is so deeply ingrained that certain forms of violence, such as beating, are considered a natural part of a woman's life. Imposition of control over the female body through various forms, including violence, is such an accepted notion that it becomes a part of everyday life. (vii-viii)

Lakshmi here talks about the violence imposed on the female body and its wretched consequences: "The violence in a woman's life often has no outward signs, like a gash on the body or a bullet in its crevices. It can seem bloodless, often.... In whichever way it enters a woman's life, it remains a collective memory of experiences, where we are both participants and viewers" (xiii). In this paper I shall assess how violence and abuse affect the lives of three female characters in Dina Mahta's *Getting Away with Murder* and how these female characters attempt to free themselves from their troubled situations through their quest for emancipation. I shall trace the journey of these three friends through their own private hells and make an appraisal of how Mallika, Sonali and Raziya reflect on the issues of childhood abuse, unfaithfulness and problematic relationships and finally become stronger women at the end of the play.

Getting Away with Murder is a two-Act play written in 1989 and was shortlisted in the BBC Play-scripts Competition in 1989. The play was first staged in 1990 at the British Council Theatre in Mumbai. *Getting Away with Murder* is first published by Seagull Books in a collection of three plays, *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival: Three Plays* (2000). The play presents the psychotic disorder of Sonali who was a victim of sexual abuse in her childhood. Beside the trauma faced by Sonali, the play also presents the angst-ridden lives of her two friends, Mallika (Malu) and Raziya. The manipulation and exploitation of Thelma, a subordinate staff of Mallika's office, also comes into focus. All these women are victims of 'gender specific' violence in some ways or the other. Though these women are educated and modern in outlook, they initially fail to overcome their plights from the miserable situations of their lives. The play also presents the incidents of gruesome killing of poor women in our country branding them as 'witches'. Thus, the play aims at reflecting the presence of various covert and overt forms of violence against women in Indian society and how such acts of violence and abuse affect the characters' private and public life.

As the play starts, we see Mallika is waiting at a restaurant for her friend Sonali. A stranger ogle her from the next table. He picks up the serviette fallen on the floor from Mallika's table and comes to her table to give it to her. He offers her a lift in his car as it is raining outside. The stranger disturbs Mallika in such a manner that she decides to leave the place without meeting Sonali. Then as Sonali appears, the stranger leaves the place disheartened. But later on, Mallika learns from the waiter that the back tyre of her car is flattened as someone has removed air from it. Mallika realises that the stranger is responsible for the violent act. Mallika not only faces this kind of abuse from a stranger at the restaurant, but also at her office of food stuff agency, her business partner Pankaj Pinglay too shows little respect for women. Mallika tells this to Sonali: "Yesterday Pinglay had the gall to tell me that women should stick to secretarial work — or, at best, PR work. Knowing fully well that I'm out there on the front-line, getting all the business, running the entire office" (61). Pinglay tries to give the contract of supplying rasgulla to Marina Hotel to another supplier in an unlawful manner without discussing it with



Mallika. He gets an appointment for lunch with the client and tells Mallika to attend it. As Mallika resents this proposal, the reply of Pinglay shows his attitude towards women:

Pinglay (facetiously): Now Mallikaji, who better than a woman when it comes to buttering up a man, eh? (68)

Through characters like Pinglay, Dina Mehta represents the authoritative attitude of men who look women as merely object of sex. Thelma, the typist in the food stuff agency faces exploitation and abuse in the hands of Pinglay. Pinglay begins to exploit Thelma when he finds Thelma making long distance calls to her ailing mother from the office phone; he starts to blackmail Thelma by telling her that he will disclose this to Mallika and she will be sacked from her job. Unable to tolerate Pinglay's wicked behaviour, Thelma offers her resignation letter to Mallika and discloses Pingla's obscene approaches to her:

Thelma: ... He—he makes vulgar talk ... and—and wicked gestures—... He's always telling me his wife is old enough to be pensioned off ... and asking me to accompany him to ... hotels outside the city. (70)

However, Mallika saves Thelma by her strategy; she tells Pinglay that Thelma has confessed that she made long distance telephone calls from the office as she had no other alternative and has promised that she will not do it again. Dina Mehta here not only reflects the various practises of visible and invisible violence against women, but also shows the presence of such resilient forces within women which can encounter dominance of the patriarchal order.

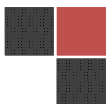
Through the character of Sonali, Dina Mehta presents the psychotic disorders in a female which is caused by her sexual abuse at the age of eight in the hands of her uncle Narotam. After her husband's death, Sonali's mother had a hard time in bringing up her children. She with her two children took shelter in house of her middle-aged bachelor brother, Narotam. Sonali's neurotic behaviour is the result of her abused past; not only she was a victim of molestation in past, she had to obey all the commands of her mother while her brother Gopal enjoyed more freedom than her:

Sonali: My mother used to exhaust herself over her household tasks – may be because she was grateful to Uncle for taking us in after Father died. She drove herself—and turned me into her satellite: I had to run her errands, mouth her opinions, feel her feelings ... Of course Gopal escaped all that because he was born with an extra set of accessories. (58-59)

Sonali is also a victim of gender discrimination in her family, but as a male her brother Gopal enjoyed the patriarchal privilege in his childhood.

Sonali's suffers from acute headache, indeterminate anger and often hysterical behaviours. These may be seen as visual signs of her trauma caused by her violent past. Dina Mehta commendably depicts the hysterical state of Sonali's psyche on the stage through verbal and visual signs:

Sonali (*hysterical now*): Stop it! Stop it! When I listen carefully to my thoughts, it's mother's voice I hear! And I remember all the things she taught me. And I remember anger from the past (*with one sweep of her hand she sends the coffee things crashing to the floor*). (64)



This unfamiliar act on Sonali — throwing of the coffee things crashing to the floor at the restaurant suggest the entrenched torment from her past childhood.

Since Sonali was abused as a child by her uncle Narotam, she is psychologically scared in her adult life also. The very thought of her mother and her past life makes her hysterical. Sonali is married to Anil and her mother-in-law stays with her. She is scared of her mother-in-law and does not have respect for her as she was deprived of her mother's love in her childhood; she hates her mother-in-law and refers to her as a 'witch':

Sonali: Oh she's not a bitch. She's a witch. Sly. Secretive. She spies on me, I know. Stores up evidence against me — with which to bludgeon me one day. (*Intensely.*) My mother-in-law hates me. (58)

In her bedroom, Sonali regularly walks to the mirror and gazes intently at her face. She often regresses into the childish voice of an eight-year-old and suddenly comes back to her normal self. Sonali's unusual behaviour along with the sudden alteration in her voice shows her unseen psychosomatic wounds. It is through Gopal that we come to know the troubled past of his sister Sonali: "So you can imagine ... night after night coming to her bed He ... threatened her into silence ... and submission ... the screams swallowed must still be tearing her up inside ... And I did nothing to help her, nothing (87-88).

In *Getting Away with Murder* Dina Mehta shows how violence can beget violence even by the acts of a woman. The problem of female foeticide is presented in this play. Sonali who faced violence in her childhood, intends to indulge in further violent act as a perpetrator. Being unable to free herself from the memories of her violent past and the fear of insecurity of a female child after its birth, Sonali decides to undergo the amniocentesis test for the second time to find out the sex of the foetus. Sonali destroyed her first foetus without taking any medical help; she again plans to abort it if female: "If it is a girl I shall abort her" (62). As Malu resents this decision of Sonali, she retorts to Malu: "Call it what you like. It is still my body and my choice. A symbol of emancipation" (63). Sonali bursts out to Malu: "Shut up, shut up! (*Thumping the table.*) To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude! I know, I know!" (63) Sonali interprets the desperate violent step through abortion of the foetus as a way of her true emancipation. She thinks that by taking this terrible step she can take repossession of her physical self. Sonali's fascination to have a male child and her conception of emancipation of women are designed by patriarchal constructions. Nivedita Menon, in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist*, remarks on the difficulties faced by women in asserting their freedom of choice:

The contradiction between our belief in the need to assert and protect the autonomy of the individual citizen and our simultaneous belief in the operation of the hegemony of the dominant power-laden values makes the 'freedom to choose' so problematic. (212)

The patriarchal desire of having a male child in the family and the fault of a woman giving birth to a female child is deeply ingrained in her psyche. She recollects her mother's words: "Well, my mother always said that a woman's failure to bear a son is just retribution for misdeeds in her past life" (63).

The play shows us that a well-educated woman like Raziya, who is a doctor, is also not free from the violence present in our culture. She suffers mentally for not being able to give birth to a baby. Raziya considers herself as a "barren woman" and encourages her husband Habib to get married to Zameena (77). Through the depiction of Raziya,

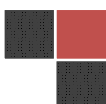


Mehta displays the intricate influences that force women to accept violence silently. In *Getting Away with Murder*, Dina Mehta draws our attention to the point that in many instances it is the mentality of women which is not prepared to challenge the rules of patriarchy. Mehta illustrates that this temperament is so innate in the thoughts of women that even well-educated women like Mallika, Sonali and Raziya initially become unsuccessful to overcome the frontiers established in the gendered society. Raziya pertinently tells Mallika: “But don’t fool yourself ... that by identifying Man as villain we have won our fight for equality. The enemy is within, don't you see? *It is in our minds, Mallika, that we are underlings!* (78)

Dina Mehta also introduces in this play another form of social evil in the form of witch-killing in our society. She not only describes the manners in which these innocent women are physically tortured once they are declared witches, but also brings into focus the motives behind this organised killing of women. The play shows that this heinous crime is often guided by the financial interests of the family members and relatives of the victim, and by the political interests of the upper-class people. Gopal as a photographer covers these cases in the districts of Bihar. Mehta draws our attention on the indifference shown by the legal system and police towards such crimes. This is evident in the play, as Dulkha Devi of Tharwar is “stripped naked within sight of the police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run round the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till she died” (80). The village priest plays an important role in turning Dulkha Devi into a witch as she had once rebuffed the priest’s advances towards her. Apart from the story of Dulkha Devi, Dina Mehta gives various other instances in the play where women and their daughters in a family fall prey to witch-hunting.

The ending of the play is, however, not all together grim. The last Scene takes place after a gap of four months in the restaurant again. Mallika is waiting for Sonali at a table. A stranger is again ‘ogling’ at her. Sonali arrives at the restaurant as “*hugely pregnant*” (90). They discuss how Raziya is leading her life happily alone as her husband Habib stays with his second wife. With the constant help of her husband Anil, Sonali is finally able to overcome the fear psychosis and is trying to lead a normal life. The attitude of Anil and Gopal show how male members in the society can support women in an effective manner and transform their condition. Anil gives her wife Sonali a new life by giving her full support. Gopal not only documents the plights of the poor women victims labelled as witches, he and Mallika hope to adopt the daughter of Minzari who is beaten to death after declaring her as a witch. Anita Singh in “Feminist Interventions: A Reading of *Light’s Out, Getting Away with Murder* and *Mangalam*,” observes that “the play goes beyond the narrow feminist agenda by encompassing in its feminist narration a broader perspective in which violence against women is countered not just by women but also men and women fighting a patriarchal order of dominant males and complicitous females” (web).

Dina Mehta in *Getting Away with Murder* represents various forms of violence which women regularly experience in the Indian society. She shows in this play how women in India are still vulnerable to various forms of abuse. The three lead women characters in this play— Mallika, Sonali and Raziya fight their difficulties and insecurities at different phases of their lives but they eventually become successful to overcome their embarrassment and indignity. Though we find them as vulnerable to exploitations and abuses at the beginning of the play, at the end we find all of them to have become



determined and stronger women. Mehta concludes her play with an optimistic message. Mallika says, “From somewhere, somehow, we must muster the strength to love” (92). Women must learn to be self-assured and independent to kill their own enemy. At the end of the play Sonali says, “Nothing can change overnight, I guess, but we can be goddesses if we want it enough” (92). Through Mallika, Sonali and Raziya Dina Mehta registers strong voices of protest against the social evils of violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Mallika begins a new life with Gopal and adopts a motherless Dalit girl; Sonali, supported by her husband Anil, overcomes the trauma of her childhood and is ready to welcome her baby to this world in a joyful manner. Raziya is also shown as leading her life in a normal way without bothering about her husband Habib staying elsewhere with his second wife. All of them overcome the issues of childhood abuse, unfaithfulness and problematic relationships and finally become stronger women at the end of the play. Through these three female characters Dina Mehta shows how to break the shackles of patriarchal dominance and achieve the path of emancipation. *Getting Away with Murder* is truly a successful play to achieve this in a brilliant manner.

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