

Victimization of Women as Depicted in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*

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ABSTRACT

The asymmetrical dissociation of rights and obligations on the basis of gender which are embedded in intra-household structures of the society leave gaps with scope for abject terror and violence. Dina Mehta's Getting Away with Murder not only goes a long way to address issues of child abuse, its associated trauma, rape, female foeticide, blind superstitious belief that is guilty of deterring human progressive development, but acts as the silent demon eating away the very fabric of humanity in the Indian society. This study on the play of Dina Mehta is an attempt to analyze it in the light of the tale of victimization and subjugation.

Keywords: *Androcentric worldview, Gender, Trauma, Rape, Female foeticide victimization.*

PROSPECTIVES AND DISCUSSION

Androcentric worldview:

“Man has been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always *masculine and paternal*, not only in the West but elsewhere too, as for example in India.” This observation by Luce Irigaray in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* (8)¹ quite aptly describes the androcentric attitude world-wide. Woman is the creator who brings every human being into this world. But the same women suffer a lot; they face violence in many aspects of their lives from total strangers who view women as sexual objects, from family members, from society which treats them inferior to men. The violence is multi-faceted and its effects on women's psyche are deeply complex and hard to understand.

Women have been treated both as symbols of retreat, personal regression and self-pity as well as symbol of growth, purity and development in the urban and rural milieu and hence there has been a splurge of literature depicting women making frantic efforts to define themselves questioning for a respectable place in the male dominated society. The Indian woman is circumscribed by certain socio-cultural constructs most of which are taboos. She needs emotional release from time to time but in the absence of proper diversion, she suffers from inner fragmentation.

Themes in *Getting Away with Murder*

The socio-political situation in India in the 1960s and 70s shook up sensitive writers and during this period Indian English drama has received fresh impetus from young women playwrights like Manjula Padmanavan, Polie Sengupta and Dina Mehta. Their plays include themes of relationships like motherhood, intricate baffling relationship of men and women, incest and adultery. Their plays focus on various types of violence as physical, emotional, psychological, and the exploitation of women at home and in profession. Their plays of resistance present the themes of, voicing against women related crimes, inequality, poverty

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illiteracy and gender discrimination and Dina Mehta's play *Getting Away with Murder* belongs to this category.

“Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* goes a long way to address issues of child abuse, its associated trauma, rape, female feticide, blind superstitious belief that is guilty of deterring human progressive development, but acts as the silent demon eating away the very fabric of humanity in the Indian society. This play reminds the strong modern woman with an independent understanding of the self and the world around her to rise up to the situations that are utmost taxing her conscience, happiness and harmony.” (Anindita Ganguly, August 2014: 083)²

The modern Indian women writers have analyzed the psyche of the silently suffering women exposing various problems arising out of the contemporary socio-cultural maladjustments. All women irrespective of class, caste and creed face similar problems. A society may be very progressive apparently advocating women's liberation but beneath the surface, a woman's status remains unchanged everywhere. Woman is compelled almost everywhere to encounter solitude, frustration and alienation in a male-dominated value structure. This kind of unquestioned power only smothers and subdues the feminine voice while all along it claims to be uplifting them out of the grim situation.

Women have suffered since the days of Puranas, myths and epics. Draupadi is humiliated in the court of Kauravas and Sita has to step into fire to prove her chastity to the world and so on. The condition of women has been more or less the same everywhere and they have been subjected to varied forms of violence and slavery in the whole world. Although geographically men and women share the same space, they live in different worlds. Gender inequality holds back the growth of individuals, the development of nations and the evolution of societies to the disadvantage of both men and women.

Getting Away with Murder is a two-Act play taken from an anthology titled *Body Blows – Women Violence and Survival*.³ This play documents the anguish, pain and oppression to which Indian women are subjected and charts the life of three friends Sonali (nicknamed Sonu), Mallika (nicknamed Malu) and Raziya, as they undergo their arduous journey of life facing body blows like gender discrimination, child abuse, female foeticide, widow ill-treatment, sexual harassment, and so on. The blurb behind the book reads:

Women face violence in many aspects of their lives from total strangers on the streets who view them as sexual objects, from members of the family, from society which assigns a status lower to men. The violence is multi-faceted not merely physical, it is more often mental and emotional, subtle and indirect, often insidious and hard to recognize, presented as it is usually in the guise of respect, idealization, concern, protectiveness. The effects of violence on a woman's psyche are deeply complex, hard to understand and even more difficult to overcome. (N. Sharda Iyer, 2007: 208)⁴

The curtain rises with the meeting of two friends, Sonali and Mallika, at the restaurant. When Sonali is late, a stranger appears and ogles at Mallika performing a seduction ritual and leaves the place on seeing Sonali. The conversation of the two friends moves from the personal to the impersonal, starting from the lives of three friends to the women in general who suffer everywhere.

For Sonali, life appears in all its inscrutable aspects. She is married to Anil and lives with her husband and Mother-in-law. She hates her mother-in-law and nicknames her 'witch'. Sonu does not trust her mother-in-law as she was deprived of her mother's love in her young

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age. She says to Mallika alias Malu, “She’s not a bitch. She’s a witch. Sly. Secretive. She spies on me, I know. She stores up evidence against me – with which to bludgeon me one day. My mother-in-law hates me,” (BB 58).⁵ She is also jealous of Malu’s independent nature. Sonali’s life is in disarray and she discloses to Mallika the agonies in her mind. Her feelings and sufferings are gradually revealed to the audience through their conversation. After her father’s death, Sonali’s mother had a tough time in bringing up her children. So she with her two children went to her lonely, middle-aged bachelor brother, Narotam’s home for shelter. Sonali was completely controlled by her mother and in her recapitulations, she records, “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 . . .” (BB59). She also highlights the gender discrimination in her family: “Gopal escaped all that because he was born with an extra set of accessories” (BB59). Gopal comes in the line of the patriarchal privilege and so need not go through the girl child’s disadvantages. Sonali’s words establish the traditional Indian mother who shows gender discrimination in her treatment of her children. Such discriminatory attitude has existed in India for generations and it is mainly because of the cultural construct of the society.

Since Sonali was abused as a child by her uncle Narotam, she suffers in her married life. She has been experiencing a trauma in her subconscious. The very thought of her mother and her past life makes her hysterical. Sonali’s mother died shortly after her wedding and she did not like her uncle Narotam. He keeps popping up in the weird water-colours she turns out. Painted always in her female foeticide and aborts it during her first pregnancy. Now she is pregnant for the second time but does not wish to continue her pregnancy. She is more afraid to give birth to a girl child and thinks that the child too will suffer in this world like her. She has developed a fear-psychosis which cannot be erased easily.

Writes Sharda Iyer:

“One cannot generalize on how women react to being raped.... A gay, outgoing self-confident woman could be shattered to pieces, become emotionally unstable, would cry, shout, become hysterical. Fear, insomnia and aversion to men are common reactions.” (215)⁶

Sonali requests Malu to persuade Raziya to do amniocentesis test on her, which is banned in India for the purpose of sex determination. Her main aim is to get rid of the girl child. Mallika is outraged by Sonali’s words. Sonu is an educated woman with a good financial status and her decision to abort a girl child is a shocking statement. Sonu’s husband is a kind of person who cheerfully welcomes a row of daughters but she is afraid for two reasons. First, Anil’s three brothers’ first born are boys and the second reason is her child abuse. The discrimination and deprivation that Sonali was subjected to in her childhood becomes a psychic residue in her subconscious mind. She has been brought up by her mother with the idea that “a woman’s failure to bear a son is just retribution for misdeeds in her past life” (BB63).

Raziya explains the medical hazards of doing amniocentesis test. She is not interested in killing the foetus: “I’m not in favour of decimating our sex. We already have an imbalance in our country – 933 females to a thousand males. And it’s getting worse...” (BB74).

When Sonali was twelve years old, her uncle died from a fall. Thus her childhood was a very bad experience to her. Her child abuse has made her averse to girl child and so she

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opts for no more weddings because female infanticide has depleted the supply of brides . . .” (BB74-75). The dramatic portrayal is corroborated by the remarks of Bhat in his article “Female Foeticide: The Devil in the Society”: “Female foeticide is one of the worst case scenarios which women expect in this country. Ironically some of the worst gender ratios, indicating gross violation of women’s rights, are found in South and East Asian countries such as India and China. It is because of this reason that the sex ratio of girls to boys in many parts of the country has dropped to less than 800:1,000” (Web).⁷

Malu gives evidences and statistics to convince Sonu and make her understand the facts. She believes that abortion instigates multiple murders Sonu is firm in her decision as her sufferings are deep-rooted in her heart that she regrets her birth, “to be born as a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude! I know, I know!” (BB63)

Sonali turns hysterical whenever she remembers her mother’s harshness. Her mother too suffered for her part. Her repressed feelings affect her psyche and she reveals her tormented mind in a monologue. She suffers from delusions and behaves like a split personality. She morphs into an eight-year-old girl and changes her voice like that of the girl to narrate the sufferings of her tormented soul and then regresses to her normal voice in a kind of incessant back and forth movement. She stands before the mirror and acts out both her personas by modulating her body and voice. The scar caused to her as a child is indelibly embedded in her adult consciousness. Raziya analyses the human mind, “the human mind is truly remarkable. It’s always patient, it hoards like a miser, it forgets nothing. And sometimes it brings the past and present together in a disconcerting fashion. Perhaps something buried in Sonali’s mind is waiting to be disinterred?” (BB73)

Sonu’s childhood traumatic experience made a deep scar and it is thus fresh in her memory and surfaces at every opportunity. First, she suffered a natural miscarriage when her husband Anil was away in Delhi. Sonu’s miscarriage on that night is reenacted before the eyes of the audience through the flashback technique.

Sonali represents the average Indian middle class woman bound by certain established norms whether logical or illogical. She bears the physical violence meted out to her. She is not against it whereas she blindly accepts it as her duty as a loyal wife. C. S. Lakshmi says “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. Even if one conforms to all norms and is a ‘good’ woman” (vii-viii)⁸

Slowly Anil tries to console Sonali and allows her to go for a catharsis. Anil enquires about *him* for which Sonali replies, “Him, *him*. You don’t know who I’m talking about? (*Moves to the painting*) Here, the canvas is still wet from yesterday, here he is, the red monster” (BB86). She calls her uncle a red monster and tells Anil that her mother used to put fresh flowers before his portrait in her home every day and forced Gopal and Sonali to remember his kindness and pray for him. Seeing the painting, she gets triggered and goes back in time. One day when Gopal and Sonali were playing, Gopal sent his toy cart flying across the floor. That very moment, Narotam appeared unsteadily in a drunkard position, “. . . his left foot seemed to find the runaway cart . . . he went into a skid and hit the floor . . .” (BB 86) Sonali and her brother Gopal worked hand in glove to do away with Narotam. Remembering all this, she is panicky and behaves strangely.

The author has used the apt imagery that her uncle Narotam is like a ferocious animal

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pouncing upon its prey. Perhaps she has delusions in which she sees a shadow figure lurking in the back and waiting to make a sexual assault on her. This mental fixation and baseless fear in her is the reason for her aversion to a girl child.

Anil takes this chance as a purgation process to overcome the fear in her. Later in the same day Sonali is asleep after check-up and consuming tablet. Sonali is “going through a private hell no one knows much about –” (BB87). She is surrounded by Mallika, Anil and Gopal, and Anil forces Gopal to reveal the truth about Sonali to save her. It is only through Gopal’s eyes, Sonali’s past is disclosed. Gopal was unfortunately helpless and used to see “night after night . . . coming to her bed, the pious swine with sandalwood paste on his foreheads and holy beads round his neck” (BB87) and threaten her into silence and submission. Gopal regrets now that he couldn’t do anything as he was just eight years old then.

As Sonali relives the traumatic betrayal done by her uncle, her husband sustains her through his love and understanding. As an understanding spouse, he enables his wife to have a cathartic effect and steady her mental equilibrium. The purgation restores Sonali to normalcy. Aristotle views, in traditional drama the recognition scene is pivotal and the emphasis is on self-discovery, on the recovery of the past as means of finding our true selves. In the process of confronting her inner conflict, Sonali has discovered her real self. She has killed the ghost that haunted her for months and found her way to salvation and peaceful life. She has the stability of mind to accept her ma-in-law as her mother. Finally matters are resolved and everyone gets relieved. This play not only depicts a child abuse but also very clearly pictures the aftermath of that abuse, the lingering psychological trauma of the victim.

Raziya, a doctor, is a barren woman and she too has a pile of sorrows. Her husband Habib opts for bigamy. Her mother-in-law believed that “an educated wife is a penance to her husband” (BB77) but Habib loved Raziya and fought with his mother to marry her. Still Habib plans to wed his niece Fatma’s friend, Zamana, a nineteen-year-old, brought up in a pious household, as his mother has been nagging him about this for a long time. Raziya is not divorcing him whereas she remains as his first wife ever. Without protesting, she just accepts the second marriage. She tells Malu that “I can’t give him children” (BB77). Raziya’s husband has forced her to go through all the tests whereas he himself has not undergone any. It is the chromosome of men that decides the gender of a child but no scientific reasons are accepted by the society and male community. The society is not ready to blame a man whereas the childless woman suffers abuses and blows physically and mentally. The major role of the woman in Indian society is seen to have children to propagate their family name. Therefore if a woman cannot conceive she is singled out, ridiculed, ostracized and stigmatized. Her subjectivity is either denied or defined according to the phallogocentric norms, and terms like “barren” and “childless” are used to negotiate her identity. Raziya accepts his decision blindly, “the fault lies with me. The fatal flaw. I’m that Joke of nature – a barren woman” (BB77).

Mallika is appalled at the indignity that Raziya is ready to bear. Sonali is unhappy about it but Raziya, though a doctor by profession, submits herself blindly to the subjugation. Raziya agrees with Malu that Sonu is protesting against men: “what Sonali’s attempting a *jihad* against men! We are the victims!” (BB78) Malu continues to support Sonu. Raziya carries pain in her heart and asserts that Indian women find it difficult to break free from the shackles of the oppressive traditions. Patriarchal culture considers women merely as instruments of reproduction. She agrees with Sonali that “woman’s inferior status is partially

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redeemed when she becomes a mother of son” (BB78). Raziya also stresses Sonu’s point that the man older than a woman has the right on her body. But Raziya is not the one to exonerate herself from the guilt but she is prepared to face the situation squarely. She states the truth “that by identifying Man as the 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! (BB78).

On the sidelines, the playwright also highlights the sufferings of widows throughout the country: “Our widows die many times before their death ...” (BB74). Ill-treatment of widows is another injustice frequently meted out to women. Widows are not allowed to live freely in their home and are bounded by the dominant man-made barriers. A widower can remarry but a widow can’t and she is not allowed to attend auspicious functions and not allowed to wear colourful clothes. Above all, women are treated as witches in many places and physically tortured. Gopal has been to north India wandering all over places like Ranchi, Chaibasa, the Sahebganj district and clicked photographs of everything from derelict fishing boats to witches. Women are viewed as sexual objects and are considered as the weaker sex but more shocking thing is that they are branded as witches. Gopal displays some reliable photographs of the women who are treated as witches in some places. They are authentic photographs of women killed in Bihar as witches and they all appeared in a 1988 issue of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. This is mentioned by Dina Mehta herself in the play.

Through Gopal’s eyes, Mehta exposes the callous attitude of policemen towards such injustices meted to women. The police and judiciary are aware of all this violence but they never initiate any serious action. They give lame excuses to remain passive. The careless response of police to such incidents is that they are deep-rooted superstitions and cannot be questioned.

Gopal has gathered the evidences against those injustices happening to the women. He is not satisfied to be a kind of rapacious tourist who just ransacks places and people’s lives for public exhibition. He wants to take some serious efforts and actions against such evils and beastly behaviour.

Women are treated as goddesses and angels but at the same time, they are treated as evil beings too. Different avatars of women like Shakti are prayed by many people. But when it comes to real life, most of the people fail to assist women in distress and desolation. “The greater the divergence between this goddess image of woman and her exploited human counterpart, the greater the fervor of her devotees –” (BB81). The play offers a strong criticism on the way women are being treated in our society. Dina Mehta gives the real picture of how women are treated and the play, though written in the 90s, is reflective of the contemporary India also.

The three women characters, Sonali, Mallika, and Raziya, in this play are not passive victims. They fight their problems and ultimately learn to free themselves of guilt, shame and humiliation and muster their strength to emerge as stronger women at the end of the play. These three women represent the pan Indian woman who finds it difficult to break the shackles of the patriarchy-controlled traditions. Finally four months later, Sonali and Mallika meet at the same restaurant with the annoying interruptions from the same stranger. Malu shares her idea of marriage with Gopal and also of adopting the little girl of Minzari. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* reiterates that the education of women is only way to exonerate them from enslavement. Raziya proves this and without depending on her husband, she continues to live her own life with her profession whereas her husband Habib happily lives with his second wife. Sonali is ready to welcome her daughter.

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She has traversed the passage through a plethora of self-doubts, fears, guilt, smothered anger and silence towards articulation and affirmation. She stopped smoking, never took the test and also wrote to her Ma-in-law to return home from Varanasi to help her in taking care of the child.

CONCLUSION

Getting Away with Murder can be taken as an important play with feminist overtones. Anita Singh 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).⁹ Education, income and awareness often help women little when they have to face societal norms and cultural mindsets.

This play explores the many dimensions and experiences of women’s lives. In the Indian patriarchal society, a woman is considered as a burden and a liability. It is Dina Mehta’s commitment to the cause of female empowerment that has made her protest against the patriarchal treatment meted out to women. Her chosen characters are the empowered women who resist being type casted into the stereotypical image of woman.

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