ABSTRACT
Of all arts forms, protest finds its most vocal, powerful, and effective expression in drama. In the Indian context, many women dramatists delineate and decry in their plays the crimes perpetrated against women in the name of tradition and culture in a male-dominated society. Dina Mehta is an accomplished Indian writer in English who raises her voice in protest against a host of crimes against women such as the evil of dowry, female foeticide, rape, child abuse, subjugation of women, and so on. In her plays, she dramatises real life incidents to bring to light these social issues. This paper attempts to study the dynamics of protest that the tragic spectacle of abuse and cruelty towards women evoke in Dina Mehta’s play Brides Are Not for Burning (1993).

KEYWORDS: Protest, Subjugation, Dowry, Corruption, Injustice

INTRODUCTION
There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

—Elie Wiesel, winner of Nobel Prize for Peace

Protest is a deliberate and conscious expression of disapproval of situations; it analyses, exposes, agitates against, and assaults the system and as such has an immense artistic potential. Of all arts forms, protest finds its most vocal, powerful, and effective expression in drama, for it has the unmatched advantage to establish live contact with the people it purports to reach and move (Agnihotri, 1990). Playwrights very often appear before us as spokesperson for their society, making their plays serve as powerful tools for social critique and reform. When a dramatist confronts a situation he cannot appreciate, much less tolerate, he protests and his dissent takes a variety of forms depending upon his vision, intensity of feeling, intellectual awareness, imaginative experience, artistic sensibility, and above all, his purpose. In such a case, the play serves not merely as the dramatist's tool to register his protest; it becomes the thing wherein the dramatist catches the conscience of the people.
Playwrights of protest drama seek, like Hamlet, to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. In the Indian context, it has been seen that the “Theatre of Protest” involves many women dramatists who delineate and decry in their plays the crimes perpetrated against women in the name of tradition and culture in a male-dominated society. Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parameswaran, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, and Manjula Padmanabhan are some of the leading names of this movement who, for a wider reach write in English, plays that project the situation of the woman. As for the use of English as a medium to communicate non-native contexts, Naik (1997) offered the defence: “In making his Indian characters speak in English, the playwright needs… no qualm at all. Let him first create living characters in living situations, and the language will take care of itself” (p. 91).

By doing so, the Indian English playwright can effectively overcome challenges and pave the way for a better and brighter future for Indian English drama which has all the possibilities and potentialities to survive the test of time and carve a niche for itself in the corpus of literary writings in the days to come. In the hands of the women dramatists, Indian English drama intersects with feminist thought to showcase the politics of exploitation that is gender-biased. This paper attempts to study the dynamics of protest that the tragic spectacle of abuse and cruelty towards women evoke in Dina Mehta’s play Brides Are Not for Burning (1993).

**Dowry Deaths**

Mehta, in Brides Are Not for Burning raises her voice against the deaths of innocent women like Laxmi, which are abundant in India. Her spokesperson Malini is, unlike her passive sister Laxmi, a rebel who challenges the discriminatory system, the judiciary biased in favour of the rich, and the corruption rampant in all fields. She is “the stuff militants are made of” (Mehta, 1993, p. 92). She is an angry young woman who wants quick solutions for the various maladies of the world. It is through Malini’s protest against the manner in which her sister’s death is treated by her husband’s family, the police, and the court that the plot progresses.

Laxmi is the victim of the ruthless dowry system that is, undoubtedly, a product of the patriarchal social order. As Kumar and Narendra (2006, p. 142) noted, the andocentric system is sustained to a large extent by the subjugation and oppression of women. Brides Are Not for Burning poses several questions that embarrass the patriarchal order. Malini asks: “Isn’t it funny… that with a fat dowry Laxmi would have been a flaming success overnight—instead of a heap of ashes today?” (Mehta, 1993, p. 51). Laxmi should have led a happy life in her husband’s house had she had a sound bank balance to back her. Malini rightly tells Anil: “…
Freedom is money in the bank, Anil. You think if Laxmi had a fat bank account they could have trampled over her? Never” (Mehta, 1993, p. 21). This mercenary attitude towards marriage and relationships clearly is a pointer to the general disintegration of values in society.

Laxmi is falsely accused of infertility. Constant naggings from Vinod’s mother goad Laxmi, under severe mental stress, to immolate herself in order to free her husband. The mother-in-law stops others from breaking open the door to save Laxmi from the flames before “the garland of fire… embraced her flesh” (Mehta, 1993, p. 78). A doctor is called three hours after the incident. “But can a doctor revive a half cooked corpse with no skin to speak of?” (Mehta, 1993, p. 78). Tarla, Laxmi’s neighbour and friend who knew of Laxmi’s place and plight in the house of the Marfatias, is forced by the circumstances of her poverty and an errant husband to give evidence in favour of an “accident” during the trial. The fact that Vinod has tried allopathic, ayurvedic, and homeopathic medicines in all forms, all dosages, pastes, powders, pills, and injections to cure his infertility is conveniently suppressed from public eye.

The coroner’s verdict of her sister’s death as an accident frustrates Malini. Insinuating murder, she mocks at the verdict: “They decided Laxmi’s sari was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident” (Mehta, 1993, p. 15). Malini brings to Anil’s notice the cases of a husband’s family coming into a lot of money after such accidents as Laxmi’s: “Last year 350 women died of burns in the city alone, some of them over-insured wives” (Mehta, 1993, p. 15). Laxmi’s life was also insured for a sum of 80,000 rupees. The issue of insurance claim unfolds yet another significant injustice against women, for it is common knowledge that many a hapless woman in India is murdered for the insurance money and the murder passed off for accident or suicide.

**Women Against Women**

Mehta projects the patriarchy practised by women themselves. Kumar and Narendra (2006) spoke of this situation in which women themselves “contribute to the perpetration of patriarchy that objectifies and destroys them” (p. 146). She shows women suffering more at the hands of women than at the hands of men. Laxmi’s in-laws ill-treat her callously. The mother-in-law taunts Laxmi ever so often about her father not honouring his promises regarding dowry. The two sisters-in-law take up the chant that a goddess of wealth—Laxmi is the name of the goddess of wealth according to the Hindu beliefs—has entered their home.
“with clothes fit for a servant and jewels not worth the name” (Mehta, 1993, p. 16). The women further wound Laxmi’s feelings by harping on her infertility. Laxmi’s alleged infertility is the cause of her suicide, if suicide it be. Mehta questions the scenario where infertility is ascribed to the woman rather unscientifically and deliberately to save the man from the ignominy of infertility, which is a trend common in India.

Extremism

Tired of poverty, Malini turns to Marxism and takes up cudgels for the cause of the poor and the oppressed. She, who once cherished dreams of pursuing a career in the legal profession, now turns to the path of revolution. It is obviously the shock of her sister’s violent end that pushes her to embrace an extremist philosophy. She is influenced by Karl Heimzen, a German who wrote on terrorism and guerrilla warfare 100 years before Mao-Tse-Tung. Malini is easily attracted to the anarchist Roy’s and his ideals of quick and extreme solutions. To Roy “murder on colossal scale has been and still is the chief means of historical development” (Mehta, 1993, p. 25). He favours violence and terrorism which, he believes, instils fear in the hearts of oppressors. He points out, “There is no remedy for the evils of our system except total destruction and a new beginning” (Mehta, 1993, p. 29). But Anil tries to wean Malini away from the path of violence and revolution:

You are not really sacrificing your life to make the world a better place, but you think you don’t very much want to live. The question then is, are you capable of living?... you are only looking for an exit. That to live you have to love yourself. And to love is to do something far more difficult than to give way to savagery. (Mehta, 1993, p. 91)

Thus there is a plea for peace, a message against violence in the play.

Towards the end of the play, Anil gives up his idealism and joins his sister in her quest to unravel the mystery behind Laxmi’s death. Malini’s quest for truth inspires him and he begins to look for more cracks in the wall of deception: “Yes, a new inquest will certainly bring out new flaws, little breaches of the law that were overlooked, little erosion of truth” (Mehta, 1993, p. 62). Mehta also makes the father, though to a lesser degree, preach against the practice of dowry.

Voices of Dissent

Mehta’s primary voice of protest remains Malini, whose dissent functions at two levels. At one, she protests against the subordination of women, and at the other, she fights against the
ruthless capitalistic set-up of which Sanjay, her rich boyfriend is the representative. The dialogue between Sanjay and Malini brings out in clear terms their respective ideologies:

Sanjay: Certainly as a businessman, I concern myself with profits. How can a business run without profit?

Malini: Which means the rich will continue to be rich and the poor to be poor—precisely because those who have nothing to sell but their labour are in the worst possible bargaining position. (Mehta, 1993, p. 45)

Malini’s convictions are firmly rooted in Marxist paradigm:

But for centuries we have taken up battle positions on either side of a great divide—the haves, a mere handful, arrayed in all their strength and splendour against great numberless ragged masses of have-nots—and I know where my place is. (Mehta, 1993, p. 87)

At the same time, she wishes to cross over, to be “where the fortunes are, where the fun is and where the lights are” (Mehta, 1993, p. 87). Thus the word “rich” has a hypnotic appeal for her and she believes that there is no use living in the jet age if you have no money for the tickets. She despises the rich, yet craves for wealth. In the words of Anil, “She is still Cindrella sighing for her rags to turn into riches, her pumpkin into a shiny Mercedes” (Mehta, 1993, p. 39). Malini, like Roy, believes that violence is action, and that her brother’s idealism is ineffective. The news of her professor’s falling a prey to her terrorist-friends makes her stop in her tracks. She realises that in joining Roy, she should only exchange one servitude for another. As these “cracks in the smooth wall of deception” come to light, one sees not only the immediate theme that is explored—that of harassment of women for dowry—but also the indignities of the human condition, the inequalities that divide man from man in a Kurukshetra without Krishna (Kumar & Narendra, 2006). The play poses a lot of questions about the many injustices that prevail in the present day society.

CONCLUSION

As a writer with a deep social commitment, Mehta uses drama more often than not as a platform to raise a voice of dissent against many an evil that afflicts society. Her protest is evinced in a thought-provoking manner in the main thread of her plays, in their theme, characterization, and dialogue. Characterization plays a significant role as a strategy to enhance the intensity of protest in the play. Malini is presented as an incarnation of protest. In fact, it is she who initiates as well as completes the jigsaw, the crossword puzzle behind the crime of her sister’s death under suspicious circumstances. Her brother Anil is also made to
voice the playwright’s concern for society and her fellow beings. Professor Palker and the
father too, to a lesser degree, express the playwright’s resentment and dissent. The portrayal
of the three women characters is also a pointer to differing attitudes: While Laxmi and Tarla
passively accept the patriarchy and the subordinate status of the female, Malini questions it
and exposes the hypocrisy and inhumanity behind it. Mehta strikes a note of optimism when
she stresses the support or involvement of male characters. Mehta’s dialogue, tinged with
brilliant wit and humour, though slightly on the darker side, is packed with a lot of punch,
irony, sarcasm, and even vitriol, to deliver the message of protest in the most telling manner.
Ravindran (1993) offered an interesting comment on the play: As it is a play of ideas rather
than action, the characters seem to represent certain social attitudes like the traditional, the
revolutionary, the idealist, the naïve, the uncultured and the “nouveau-riche” rather than flesh
and blood individuals. And dialogue, being the vehicle of ideas and attitudes, tends to
relegate other dramatic elements to the ground. (p. 32). It is indeed significant that Mehta
dedicates Brides Are Not for Burning to “all angry young women who can be whatever they
choose to be” (Mehta, 1993, p. 5). The dedication itself bears testimony to the playwright’s
consciousness of women’s power and competence. It is certainly this awareness of and
commitment to the cause of the female and her empowerment that has motivated Mehta to
protest against the shameful treatment meted out to her by the iron hand of patriarchy. She
sends across to her spectators and readers—strongly and vehemently—the message that
brides are not for burning as a sacrificial ritual at the altar of avarice and greed!

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