CHAPTER - V

Scripting Violence – Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta

I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly I wanted the hurt to away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.


The presence of pain in the speaker’s life draws her nearer to theory - a fictional space that she constructs, where she expects to find a healing touch. Theory becomes a way of combating the pain for bell hooks (she has made a substantial contribution to the field of feminism). For using theory as a mode of intervention and trying to make people around her to do things differently and look at things differently, she is often punished by her father. And her complaint against her father before her mother is nothing but a futile attempt that adds to her suffering. Her mother makes her feel that she needs more punishment to keep her mind on the right track. The quoted passage by hooks seems relevant in this context; because like her use of theory as a mode of intervention to challenge the traditional/dominant way of looking at things, the practice of writing /scripting by the women playwrights can also be considered as a means of intervention in the practices of violence against women.

While hook is punished for inventing a different approach of looking at the existing things, the new canon of dramatic writing established by the emerging women playwrights is yet to receive full fledged recognition and appreciation. Scripting violence by the women playwrights can be considered as an active reaction by them against the violence experienced by women. These playwrights seem to voice the condition of almost all sections of women in Indian society who undergo different
acts of violence. It is a significant initiative taken by them to create a new canon of theatre which includes plays on women by women. And this effort was particularly fueled by the feminist enterprise that emerged as a visible political phenomenon from the middle of the twentieth century. Jill Dolan says: “In theatre practice and criticism, liberal feminist efforts are responsible for the wider visibility of women playwrights, directors, producers and designers, and the creation of richer roles for women performers” (2009: 4).

In the context of Indian theatre also, this act scripting woman conscious plays by women about women’s lives could be considered as a part of the feminist writing project as it seems to pose a challenge to the mainstream theatre and its stereotypical representation of women. Feminist writing, as Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti observe, although derivative in nature drawing from different disciplines, is notable for the extent to which it has challenged other disciplines and opened new ways of questioning and interpreting social life (1999: xi).

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, the re-discovery of women’s theatre history in the West in 1980s was one of the influential factors which inspired the women playwrights to write women’s theatre or woman conscious plays. This re-discovery finds a resonance in the Indian theatrical tradition also. There was a simultaneous emergence of women’s theatre in India through playwrights like Mahasweta Devi, Shanta Gokhale, Usha Ganguli, Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, etc. Predictably these plays are also woman conscious plays. These playwrights have started writing plays (both in English and regional languages) representing the issues concerning women, and also voicing their own resistance to social pressures imposed on them in the literary field.
Given the length of a PhD thesis, it would not be possible to include all the woman conscious play written by the above mentioned playwrights. Hence, this chapter would particularly focus on the selected woman conscious plays written by Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta who write originally in English. Very little critical explorations of these texts are available -- proof of the fact that playwriting in English in India by women is yet to receive full-fledged social attention and recognition. It still remains a marginalised genre.

**Analysis of Manjula Padmanbhan’s plays: Lights Out**

Manjula Padmanabhan (b.1953) is a Delhi based playwright who has scripted plays originally in English. *Lights Out* and *Harvest* are her two important contributions to the world of contemporary Indian drama. *Lights Out* deals with the issue of sexual violence against women while *Harvest* deals the issue of organ selling in India. It is a play with international acclaim that won Onassis Award in 1997. She has also scripted an interesting collection of monologues named *Hidden Fires* (2003) which relates to various forms of violence and chaos prevailing in the society. *Hidden Fires* includes the following monologues — “Hidden Fires”, “Know the Truth”, “Famous Last Words”, “Points” and “Invocation”. These monologues are written by the author for Peace Works - a peace initiative with young people organised by “The Seagull Foundation for Arts” to stop violence of all kinds. They recount the stories of religious/communal violence affecting the lives of men, women and children; of sufferings of the marginalised categories; of narrow concept of community and nation; of media supporting the ineffective and corrupt governmental steps and so on.

Apart from writing plays, Padmanabhan has also contributed to the other genres like short story and novel; she is also a proficient cartoonist.
To begin with, Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* is based on a real incident of gang rape that took place in Santa Cruz; Bombay in 1982. The play is resonant with sexual violence perpetrated on women by a group of four people at regular intervals, and records the reaction of a small group of upper-middle class people towards that gang rape. With the help of fictional characters, who are representative of a stereotyped upper-middle class mentality, Padmanabhan has drawn our attention to the bitter and existing reality about women’s lives in contemporary Indian society.

The characters in the play are - Bhaskar, Leela, Mohan, Surinder, Frieda and Naina. None of them come forward to actually help the victim who is being gang raped in real time with extreme physical violence. Except for Surinder and Naina, the other characters of the play show no real concern for the victim; they seem to be deliberately turning a blind eye to the gruesome (ongoing) incident. The screaming of the victim affects Leela terribly and she becomes hysterical, appealing repeatedly “call the police”, “call the police”. Ironically she does not want the police because of her concern for the victim; but for her individual interest; to get back peace at home. Leela says: “I don’t care what they believe. The sounds torture me...I don’t care what they do, or who they are - I just want them far away, out of my hearing ...out of my life” (2000:44). In Leela, the playwright has revealed the moral callousness that women also display towards victims of sexual violence. It is interesting to see a woman playwright revealing how women can also at times become apathetic towards other women. However, a contrast is seen in the character of Naina, Leela’s friend, who desperately wants to help the victim, but finally moves away. Perhaps, she becomes aware of the possible violence that may endanger her own family life.
Bhaskar and Mohan are conspicuously trying to ignore this ongoing violence by justifying it as rituals in a religious ceremony; or a new cult which could be violent initially; or a domestic fight and so on. Although both of them are aware of what is actually happening outside the apartment, they do not want to take responsibility or help the victim because, they, like Naina, are afraid to risk getting involved. But unlike Naina, they rather seem to actually enjoy watching the violent scene and derive pleasure from it. John Berger’s statement that seeing is an act of choice and it is affected by what we know and what we believe seems relevant in this context. Seeing establishes our place in the world and it is with words we explain that world (1972:7-8). Here Bhaskar and Mohan’s act of “seeing” is also a choice; their choice is influenced by the conventional view of woman as an object of fulfilling sexual gratification. In a sense, this is a reflection of the sense of power and pleasure that the male members of a society derive from witnessing sexual violence.

The indication of a woman being gang raped is implied in scene (i) and (ii) of *Lights Out*. It is in scene (iii) that this entire act is revealed through verbal signs. Here the words function almost as visual images:

Bhaskar: See, they are kicking her-
Mohan: Yes, around the stomach and the - uh - chest and in the face.
Bhaskar: And there now-they are hitting her with their fist, aren’t they?
Mohan: Yes, that too.
Bhaskar: And now ….they are holding her legs apart -
Mohan: One man each leg, spread apart… (2000: 37)

In the play, violence is physically absent on stage and represented by means of linguistic signs. It is a daring act on the part of the playwright to write a play on gang rape given the risk involved in the representation of such issues. After witnessing this violent crime against that poor woman, the spectators (the characters/actors on stage
who are now spectators) still compare her to a “devil” possessed by a demon’s power. The moment Naina interferes saying that it is a gang rape accompanied by extreme physical violence, both Bhaskar and Mohan immediately turn the victim into a whore. They argue that the victim could be a whore who can not be raped. Because, according to them, a whore is indecent, has no shame and whose whole livelihood is sex. Generally, in rape the victim is further victimised because of the dichotomous patriarchal view of “good” woman and “bad” woman. A good woman is the wife/mother living under husband’s protection and the woman who deviates from this norm is bad woman and tacitly assumed to be sexually available because she is “unprotected” (Kosambi 1994:19-24). Here Bhaskar and Mohan adopt this patriarchal view to situate and even to justify the gang rape. Besides, their dialogues appear complimentary to each other signifying the traditional attitude towards violence against women. At the same time, they are afraid of being physically harmed by the assailants, a fact they want to conceal to maintain their “male pride”. Commenting on this fear experienced by Bhaskar and Mohan, Sonu Shiva says that both the characters use “defence mechanisms” to hide their timidity by building up illusionary interpretations to the reality, because they lack real courage to help the victim (2005: 278).

The only character who realises the issue and wants to take up immediate action is Surinder. He becomes enraged and wants to beat up the assailants. He plans to adopt violent means to prevent the ongoing crime. Here Surinder’s move is an echo of what René Girard says about the nature of violence, which is self propagating and that only violence can put an end to violence (2005: 27). But even as he plans his intervention, the assailants go away leaving the victim almost dead. Through his character, Padmanabhan shows that people like Surinder still exist in our society,
although their presence do not make much of a difference in eliminating violence. The sexual violence taking place outside that multistoreyed apartment also affects the children of Bhaskar and Leela. In a sense, they are also traumatised by their parents who keep them locked up inside a room all through the evening.

Representation of violence in performance itself is problematic in terms of the use of actual theatre pragmatics (that is the use of verbal signs, actor's gesture, music, sound, etc). The inappropriate use of the stage components may lead to the misrepresentation of a serious issue like gendered violence. Misplaced emphasis and unnecessary trivialisation in dialogue delivery may lead to some kind of grotesque levity on stage. Keeping these issues in mind, I shall go on to analyse one of the productions of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*.

*Lights Out* was staged by Players Enthusiastic Forum at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati on 10th July, 2009 under the direction of Giyasuddin Ahmed. As the play is basically dialogue based, violence against a poor woman was represented through verbal descriptions by the actors along with other stage materials. Violence was not directly shown on the stage. However, when a play is performed on stage, the play becomes one of the several components of theatre like actor, space, light, music etc. Performance of a text is not simply the transformation of the text into performance. But this specific performance of *Lights Out* appeared to be a mere transcription of the written text. Besides, the major focus of the play was on Leela's disturbed mental state, instead of the woman being brutalised.

This problematises what the director actually wanted to communicate. Like in real society, in the performance too, the representation of the poor woman being violated remained marginalised. This specific performance of the play was not
therefore successful in making the audience feel the trauma of social crimes like rape. Otherwise, the performance could have been used as an activist theatre — an instrument for social change which the playwright seems to have in mind while choosing this theme. Although the dialogues, gestures, facial expression and movement of Mohan and Bhaskar were appropriate to the kind of attitude they had towards that violent act, the overstated levity in their tone while delivering the dialogues turned the serious issue into a comic one. Their voyeuristic interest becomes clearer in the performance and subverts the entire notion of sympathy for the victim. In Leela’s character, a lack of proper realisation of her dialogues was seen. It was only Naina who could touch a chord; the spectator’s being jolted back to considering the seriousness of the crime. Her performance brought silence to the hall, which can be considered as a sign of audience’s realisation of the seriousness of the issue. At the end when Surinder entered into the stage, the intensity of that violent act could be felt. His high pitched voice and becoming silent in between the conversation - all these traits represented his response towards the victim. Both in the text and on stage, Frieda remains silent, which could be a sign of her better realisation of this savagery as well as her own “inferior” status in society.

The sound design is an integral part of the semiotic design of theatre of which music is also a part. The success and failure of a performance also depend on how the various acoustic components are arranged during the performance process. Again coming back to the performance of *Lights Out*, it was seen that the sound design of it was the only component that could project the pain experienced by the victim. The screaming of the victim brought silence to the auditorium. The use of the red colour of lights is significant as well as symbolic in the text. In the performance also, the visual
presence of the red lights on the window becomes a sign signifying danger. The theatre lights becoming dim when the cast appears and then again coming on abruptly (as per the stage directions in the text) can be seen as a sign of the society’s coming out of ignorance to the light of consciousness; a realisation of the crimes that are being committed against women everywhere.

Bhaskar, Leela and Mohan discuss the ways of masking the crime that is being committed (Perf. Guwahati: 2009)

Bhaskar’s indifference to what is going on outside the compartment; Leela’s impatience! (Perf. Guwahati: 2009)
Analysis of Dina Mehta’s Plays: Getting Away with Murder

Dina Mehta is a Mumbai based playwright who has also scripted plays in English like Manjula Padmanabhan. Brides are not for Burning, The Myth-makers, Sister Like You and Getting Away with Murder are some of her important contributions to the world of contemporary Indian drama. Getting Away with Murder deals with the story of Sonali who is a victim of child sexual abuse, and the after-effects of this violence on her adult life. Centering on Sonali’s story, the play also represents the painful experiences of a couple of other young women who include Mallika, Raziya and Thelma. They all are victims of gender specific violence against women in some ways or the other. Getting away with Murder resonates with both covert and overt forms of violence that affect women’s public and private lives.

The sufferings of the three friends Sonali, Mallika (also known as Malu) and Raziya may be termed as “self-imposed” as all of them, despite being well educated and having a modern outlook, are actually unable to free themselves from the traditional constraints. The happenings in the play show that the problem basically lies in the mind-set of women who practically fail to welcome positive changes. The traditional patriarchal norms are so ingrained in their mind that they conform to the boundaries created by the embedded tradition.

Getting Away with Murder begins with Malu in a restaurant who is waiting for her friend Sonali to join her. The beginning itself introduces a very common form of violence that women encounter in everyday lives outside the domestic sphere; a form of violence that is almost always ignored. The stranger in the restaurant makes Malu feel uncomfortable and she decides to leave before Sonali reaches. Despite Malu’s
articulated unwillingness to interact with him, the stranger approaches her. The
reader/audience can easily perceive the sexual innuendos motivating his behaviour:

Stranger: I’ve finished breakfast also. Such a wet day, but you don’t have to
worry. My car is waiting outside.
Malu: So is mine. Get lost, mister. (2000:57)

A sense of discomfort mixed with anger is evident in Malu caused by the stranger’s
unwanted interference into her personal space. The vulnerability of women to such
obnoxious forms of behaviour by men is often visible in public places; it works to restrict
their personal liberty to move or act freely. The physical presence of the stranger on stage
ogling at Malu, his taking up the fallen serviette and approaching Malu with it, and Malu
pretending to read the newspaper to avoid him – the enactment of these actions on stage
can constitute a visual image of the entire situation signifying Malu’s discomfort.

The same Malu also experiences other less spectacular forms of violence in
the hands of Pankaj Pinglay, a co-partner in her foodstuff agency. Pinglay’s attitude
towards women in general and working women specifically is far from being
satisfactory. He seems to exhibit a traditional notion of woman as merely of objects of
fulfilling sexual desires. As he says: “Now Mallikaji, who better than a woman when
it comes to buttering up a man, eh?....” (2000:68). According to him, in work places
woman should stick to secretarial work or at best to PR works. He even fixes
appointment for Malu without talking her consent which indicates how Pinglay
underestimates his partner mainly because she is a woman. Not only Mallika, but also
Thelma, the typist in Mallika’s food-stuff agency experiences the same behaviour
from Pingaly. Thelma’s condition is worse because apart from being a female, she is a
low-rank employee in the agency. Her lower position in the office makes her more
vulnerable to male violence while Malu’s access to official power saves her
somewhat. Thelma is compelled to give in her resignation as she finds Pinglay’s continued wicked gestures and vulgar talk intolerable. Pinglay once finds Thelma making a long distance phone call due to her mother’s illness. Taking advantage of this, he starts blackmailing her. He mentally harasses her saying that if he discloses this fact before Mallika, Thelma would be dismissed. The fear of losing her job leads Thelma to obey Pinglay who goes on abusing her by various means. The following conversation between Malu and Thelma clearly reveals the unbearable condition in which Thelma finds herself in the office:

Thelma: No No! The morning when he called me in to dictate the Memo he... he squeezed me here, I swear to God!

Malu: Thelma, you’re referring to... Mr. Pinglay?

Thelma: He is always telling me his wife is old enough to be pensioned off...and asking me to accompany him to...hotels outside the city. (2000:70)

Finally, Malu strategically saves Thelma from Pinglay’s trap when Thelma confides in her and tells her about her sufferings. Malu forgives her and informs Pinglay about this. The man is defeated in his intent. Here Malu’s reaction and stance indicate the emerging changes pertaining to women’s position in Indian society. Dina Mehta not only represents the various forms of visible and invisible violence against women, but also shows the presence of such forces within women which can challenge the order of things. Malu is capable of challenging the conspiracies of the male world (represented by Pinglay); she protects Thelma from suffering further humiliation and psychological abuse perpetrated by Pinglay. The verbal signs in the play effectively portray the picture of psychological abuse undergone by Thelma. At the same time, the gestures of dabbing her eyes (as mentioned in the text) after making the confession can be considered as a visual sign of her miserable condition in this context. A sense of uneasiness is evident in Thelma when she describes her condition before Malu. She takes
recourse to repetition, and the pauses in her dialogue are significant representing her discomfort in the face of all these troubles.

Like Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* and Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September*, *Getting Away with Murder* is also primarily a dialogue based play. Like Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September*, this play also deals with the long lasting after-effects of sexual victimisation of female children. Not only is the victim affected by such violent acts, the lives of other people closely associated with the victim are affected too, and the situation is ripe for begetting further violence.

The chief protagonist Sonali in *Getting Away with Murder* is sexually abused by her uncle Narotam at age eight, which is directly revealed by Gopal towards the end of the play:

Gopal: I guess there is no...less brutal way of saying that my sister was sexually abused...from the time she was 8 years old. And Sonali was 12 when Uncle Narotam broke his head. 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. (2000: 87-88)

Gopal’s speech exposes the trauma of sexual violence that makes Sonali’s life a living hell. Instead of providing scope for direct on-stage representation of this violence, Mehta represents it through the words of Gopal who is an eye-witness. The playwright seems to be aware of the negative impact of direct visual representation of such violent acts on stage. Hence, there is no scope for visual representation of violence in the play.

The first half of the play portrays the strange behaviour exhibited by Sonali which is nothing but the direct outcome of her abused past. The past experience of violence affects her present. Her acute headache, hysterical reactions, and her
hidden/unspecific anger at things resemble the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. In Sonali’s case this disorder seems to be caused by her experience of childhood sexual abuse. While analysing Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September* in the previous chapter, the term post traumatic stress disorder is discussed in detail. Mehta effectively portrays the hysterical state of Sonali by the appropriate use of 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*). (2000:64)

This unusual behaviour on Sonali’s part – throwing of the coffee things crashing to the floor in the restaurant (while revealing her thoughts before Malu) may be seen as a visual sign on stage suggesting her unstable mental condition. The unexpected sound of crashing produced thus may supplement the feeling of shock and suspense in the reader’s/audience’s consciousness.

The most stunning revelation of Sonali’s plight comes in Act I, scene (iii). The entire scene is devoted to the description of Sonali’s present traumatic condition caused by her past experience of abuse. Mehta not only describes her condition in words, but also adds gestures and other bodily movements to her character – all these when enacted on stage can effectively portray the after-effects of that violence on her. On stage, Sonali may be presented not only as a semiotic content but also as a visual image to be perceived along with her strange physical behaviours and neurosis. The performance possibilities of her dialogue are also equally significant. If directed with a conscious awareness of the problem of child sexual abuse, the words are capable of creating a striking impact on the audience’s mind. As the playwright choose to
represent the personal panic-stricken state of the protagonist, the choice of the bedroom as setting is appropriate where Sonali is seen pacing the floor agitatedly in her choli and petticoat with an unlit cigarette in hand. The following long monologue spoken by Sonali along with the stage directions provided by the playwright represents her miserable condition in its totality:

Sonali: Dear God, I can’t take more of this (tries to light her cigarette, but hand shakes too much). Someone must help... me (moves to the mirror, stares into her intently then begins to speak in petulant 8-year-old voice as she regresses in time). Don’t want to sit near him, mother. Don’t like to be touched. Don’t like to be tickled... (looks away from the mirror and declaims in her normal voice). ‘When you tickle us, do we not laugh?’ (Back to the mirror, regressing). Don’t! Don’t! (Laughs widely as she squirms). Your fingers are not kind, they hurt... don’t... (squirming, laughing helplessly) ha ha. Stop it, stop! (Low, on a note of pain and fear). What are you doing to me, leave me alone (Hand to her mouth, she gags and retches, then turning away from the mirror, in her adult voice). Dear God, I am again circling around something alien and familiar ...and my head hurts, it hurts... (as she moves towards her bed she starts as she catches a glimpse of her mother-in-law offstage at the door far left). You have no other work, old woman, but to peep at me-like him! Every time I took a bath I could hear him outside... breathing... waiting to look at me without my clothes on... (screaming) get away from my door...get away or I’ll tell Anil you’re hounding me... (slams the door shut; then sits on her bed, head bowed in her hands. Blackout). (2000:66)

The changes in her voice that the playwright ascribes to Sonali are required to represent the physical and psychological changes in Sonali after undergoing sexual abuse. The abnormalities evident in her character are the outcome of the deep psychological scars that she carries with her. Even in her adulthood she is unable to
free herself from the haunted memories of sexual violence. She often regresses into her childish voice, behaving like an eight year old girl, moving to the mirror and gazing at her face intently. Then again she regains her adult voice, squirms and laughs helplessly and loudly. On stage, the visualisation of these activities may establish a physical contagion between Sonali and the audience, and lead to develop a sense of empathy in the audience’s mind.

Sonali is not only a victim of child sexual abuse; she is also neglected by her mother for being a girl. Indulging in the traditional negligence relating to the birth of a female child and the preference given to a boy child, Sonali’s mother neglects her and cares only for Gopal. As Sonali says: “My mother never loved me. She had eyes only for Gopal...and for him” (2000: 86). Neglect/indifference shown towards Sonali is not violence overtly; but it can be considered as an act of psychological violence which is less spectacular but more effective. The traditional mindset of Sonali’s mother is the outcome of her being part of the gendered society; a society that views women or (a girl child) as passive beings, only required for the purpose of fulfilling men’s sexual needs. Sonali’s dialogues in this respect are significant when she says: “...Mother told me that just as a scorpion enjoys stinging people with all the pent-up venom in its tail, lordly men desire to sting their women – and a good wife always lets her husband to do so...”(2000: 86). Her speech reveals how women are socialised into normative roles of subordination and subjugation and how this process continues via women themselves. Later Sonali’s mother is successful in sowing the seeds of the same traditional mindset in Sonali who subsequently goes to the extent of killing her female foetus. This is an example of violence against women inherent in the tradition. These stereotypical/traditional notions about women are nothing but patriarchal constructs which are being carried on for generations after generations.
The old saying that violence begets violence is noticeable in *Getting Away with Murder*. Physical, psychological and sexual violence against women leave deep scars on its victims. The victims suffer from depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress syndrome and food disorders; the list is endless. They also are seen attempting suicide, taking drugs and exhibiting various signs of somatic and psychosomatic disorders; making them vulnerable to further violence (Romito 2008: 16). This is very much relevant in Sonali's case, who suffers not only violence but also indulges in further violent acts as the perpetrator.

Another form of violence against women is female foeticide. It is predominant in many Asian countries including India. The practice of female foeticide is common not only among the poor uneducated families, but also among the rich, educated and middle class families in India. Foeticide is the product of the “traditional” notion of women as burdensome beings. Besides, the prevalence of dowry system also promotes female infanticide and foeticide; modern technology and medical science also aid and abet the rise of such forms of violence against women by inventing methods of sex-selection. Female foeticide results in the growth of unbalanced sex ratio, leading to the scarcity of the girl child. Since the 1980s, India has witnessed a sharp decline in juvenile sex ratio; this decline of female population in India is indeed striking. As pointed by Tulsi Patel, the decline of the sex ratio from 972 women in India in 1921 to 933 women in 2001 for every 1000 men is surprising. The growing rate of female foeticide is one of the major reasons of this decline. The sex determination tests resorting to female foeticide are entangled with the structures of gender relations. The narrative of everyday experiences being a female and a cluster of conditions and pre-existing networks produce this daughter dispreference syndrome (2004:887-889).
The application of female-selective abortion (FSA) has increased since the middle of the 1980s in most Asian countries. By the early 1980s, female-selective abortion based on amniocentesis had become available in some cities in India, mainly in the north Indian states and also in Mumbai. By the 1990s, amniocentesis as the predominant means of determining sex had been replaced by ultrasound. So far activism in this area is concerned, it is seen that India has longest history of activism and policy making to stop female-selective abortion practices. In 1988 Maharashtra became the first Indian state to ban the amniocentesis test. Fines and imprisonment were made compulsory for both who administer the test and those women who undergo this test. But how effective this ban was still remains questionable given the gap between policy making and its implementation. Apart from Maharashtra, many other Indian states like Tamil Nadu also took preventive measures like giving incentive to the parents of a daughter when she reaches a particular age. In 1994 the northern state of Haryana decided to pay Rs 2,500 to the parents of a new born girl. But these governmental programmes are designed for the poor, lower income households and they ignore the fact that female-selective abortion is practised among the rich families as well.

Many educated mothers, who undergo mistreatment for being a female, are afraid of giving birth to a girl; they think their daughters would also face the same. This attitude is clearly seen in Sonali. Inheriting her mother’s attitude that a male child is preferable to a girl child, Sonali decides to undergo the amniocentesis test for the second time so as to find out whether the foetus is male or female; planning to abort it if female. Thus, she inherits the violent tradition of female foeticide. Even the modern education system and modernity have also failed to eradicate this social evil which is so deep rooted in the minds of women, men and the society as a whole. The act of representing this prenatal violence against the girl child in dramatic form opens up multiple ways of investigating and understanding this issue. Thus, Dina Mehta
makes an attempt to create awareness on female foeticide by creating a fictional character like Sonali; such an attempt at creating awareness is always meaningful as without it social change is impossible.

With the intention of executing this task (foeticide), Sonali approaches her friend Raziya, who is a doctor by profession. First time Raziya does the test heavily pressurised by Sonali. When the report shows the presence of a female foetus in Sonali’s womb, she herself destroys the foetus without medically terminating her pregnancy. A mother who herself is a victim of sexual violence commits another act of violence against her own unborn female child; thereby turning herself into an executor of the same violence. By portraying Sonali in this manner, Mehta shows the interconnectedness between various instances of violence. Apparently it is strange to find a modern and well educated woman like Sonali taking the radical step of killing her female foetus. But as the play proceeds, it becomes clear that the problem lies not only in Sonali; the entire gendered social system is to be blamed for shaping Sonali and her mother’s mentality in this way.

Along with this long-established conventional attitude toward women, there also exist some superstitious beliefs that make them suffer and indulge in female foeticide. This is evident in Sonali’s speech:

Sonali: So his mother would be mortified if I presented Anil with a girl as his first born.
Malu: And You? Would it also mortify you?
Sonali: Well, my mother always said that a woman’s failure to bear a son is just a retribution for misdeeds in her past life. (2000:63)

Hence, her intense realisation: that “...to be born a girl is to be subjected to violence and servitude! I know, I know” (2000: 63). Her experiences as a female member of the society constitute her mentality in such a way that she is totally against giving birth to a female child. She considers her act of of female foeticide as a sign of her
emancipation; she says: “Call it what you like. It is still my body and my choice. A symbol of my emancipation” (2000:63). She is not only doing violence to her unborn girl child, but also to her own body.

Raziya, unlike Sonali is not a victim of sexual abuse. The violence that Raziya undergoes is more subtle. The marriage between Raziya and Habib is the result of their mutual love. But Raziya fails to give birth to a baby, and so her mother-in-law insists that Habib should marry another woman. Raziya accepts her condition as the lot of a “barren woman” and encourages Habib to get married to Zameena. A doctor by profession, Raziya goes through all the required medical tests for not being able to produce a child while Habib is under no constraints for also doing the same.

Raziya suffers by internalising the same traditional attitude like Rama in The Vultures, that a woman should fulfill all the demands made by her husband and his family; failure is always accompanied by serious penalties that a woman has to pay. This traditional outlook is represented in the play by including Raziya’s story. Her words here function as effective symbolic signs (while referring to the plight of Raziya, the playwright provides a little scope for the inclusion of visual signs) representing the prevailing outlook concerning women in a male governed society.

Raziya: You think I haven't asked myself that? (With pain) I find an ancient tyranny at work within me that makes me believe that a man's desire for children must be satisfied. Just as Sonali believes that a woman's inferior status is partially redeemed when she becomes a mother of sons. And just as you, my dear Malu, believe that a man has the right to the body of a woman younger than he—where are you going? (2000:78)

Perhaps the playwright thinks that the solemn deliberation of dialogues in this context would fittingly convey the implicit pain underneath Raziya’s complacent exterior. Despite being aware of the fact that emotionally she has suffered much in her
relationship with Habib, she accepts the changes silently. That Raziya is well aware of her victimisation is reflected in her speech as she says to Malu:

Rajiya: I doubt, Malu that what Sonali's attempting is a jihad against men! We are the victims! (2000:78)

Inclusion and representation of a character like Raziya in the play is significant, showing the complexities and the complex network of factors that compel women to accept violence tacitly. Like Sonali, Raziya is also a modern educated woman who fails to liberate her mind from the stereotyped notions concerning women's inferior status. In Getting Away with Murder, Dina Mehta draws attention to the fact that the traditional mindset of the women characters is partly responsible for their vulnerability to gender specific violence.

In chapter two of this thesis, while discussing violence and gendered violence, I have mentioned that in specific contexts violence against women is "self-imposed" due to the existence of certain normative beliefs already ingrained in their psyche. Even educated women are found to accept such stereotyped, normative and superstitious norms and beliefs passively. The gendered nature of the society privileging men always is no doubt responsible for the victimisation of women; but at the same time only making man responsible for the sufferings of women one cannot make an end to the problem. Mehta shows that this mentality is so deep rooted in the minds of women that even modern and educated women like Sonali, Raziya and Mallika fail to break the boundaries created by the gendered society. Raziya's speech in this context clearly indicates this:

Raziya: Go then! But do not feel yourself that you and I are so different, Malu! Or 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! (2000:78)
A similar stereotype is also evident in Mallika who often feels insecure in her relationship with Gopal. Gopal is younger than Mallika and so she thinks that Gopal will be bored with an old woman like her. Mallika also possesses the stereotyped notion that a woman should always marry a man older than her. Gopal’s erotic emotional history adds to her feeling of insecurity as she says to Sonali: “I am supposed to be a stabilising factor in your brother’s erotic emotional history” (2000:60). Mallika is even scared to ring him up late at night as according to her there is every possibility of finding Gopal with some other woman:

Malu (defiantly): Yes! (In a changed voice) The truth is, I’m scared, Raziya
Raziya: sacred!
Malu: If I call so late, I might find another woman with him. (2000:72-73)

Here her voice changes from being defiant to scary. This could be used as an acoustic sign signifying the dualities in her character – a woman with a strong exterior but weak enough to really challenge the “male” order. Despite the feeling of insecurity surrounding her relationship, she accepts Gopal as he is.

Getting Away with Murder not only represents the various forms of visible and invisible violence against women in private and public spheres committed by individual perpetrators; but it also brings into focus another heinous form of violence against woman perpetrated by a group under the pretext of witch killing. The play contains only verbal description of witch killing through the conversation between Gopal and Malu. Apart from the exhibition of some photographs of those women labelled as witches, the victims do not appear on stage. This is a play written primarily to be staged and perhaps Mehta is aware of the difficulties associated with enacting this issue on stage within the stipulated time. As per stage directions, the playwright suggests that the photographs may be displayed as slides on stage walls to increase the dramatic impact (2000:78). The spotlight on those photographs followed by the comments of Gopal may contribute to an effective representation of witch hunting.
The sight of Indumati shakes Malu, who thinks that people indulge in such heinous crimes because of ignorance. The verbal description of Indumati's situation in the play is sufficient enough to create a clear image of witch killing in the minds of the audience:

Gopal: It's is smeared with muck. That's indumati. The mob at her heels is drumming her to the river, where they'll kill her and throw her in. (2000:79-80)

Mehta not only portrays the ways in which women are tortured physically once they are declared witches; but also refers to the various reasons behind this systematic killing of women by branding them as witches. Such violence is not merely generated by superstitions and ignorance; at its deep level, it seems to be guided by the political interest of the family members and relatives of the victim and also of the upper/privileged social classes. Gopal's speech in this context is again powerful enough to highlight the other reasons that promote witch killing:

Gopal: Ignorance is not the only factor today – the persecution is prompted by lust, caste tensions, greed for land. In the Singbhum district alone 200 women are killed as witches every year. Male relatives move in on their land... (2000:80)

Mehta also exposes the indifference shown by the police to such events. In many cases it is seen that the legal system is also influenced by norms of patriarchy and supports the binary gender distinctions. The indifferent outlook and the lack of serious responsibility demonstrated by the police system are evident in Dulkha Devi's case; she is turned into a witch and physically tortured in front of a police station till she dies:

Gopal: I had to bully them into action. Threaten them with dire consequences if they didn't move their ass...Their usual attitude is: this is a deep-rooted superstition, the police can do nothing. Worse, they are often the perpetrators themselves! (Projects another photograph). See here, Malu. This is Dulkha Devi of Tharwar. The day I snapped her in the bazaar, she was stripped naked within sight of the police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run round the village while men beat her with burning brands and sticks till she died (switches off). (2000:80)
It is not only the legal system that is complicit in such cases of women’s victimisation, the religious system is also equally responsible. Here the village priest plays the major role in turning Dulkha Devi into a witch. In fact she becomes a victim of the priest’s revengeful attitude. She had once repulsed the priest’s advances. So he takes his revenge by pronouncing her a witch out to devour him, after having already consumed her own husband.

Gopal’s collection of photographs includes photographs of widows and other deserted women living in Chibasa. These women and their daughters are easy prey to witch hunting. Gopal’s information in the play reveals that the male relatives of these people accuse them of practicing witch-craft with the intention of usurping their land and other properties. He highlights the photograph of Minzari, a widow with a three years old daughter. Minzari is declared witch by her brother-in-law who wants to possess her land. Witch killing is still rampant in Indian society.

Dina Mehta’s effort to represent this form of violence against women is of contemporary relevance, given that such killing of women in the name of witch hunting is still going on even in the 21st century. Not only in the districts of Bihar (as mentioned in the play), its presence can be seen in certain districts of Assam, Orissa, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and other states also. According to a report published in The Times of India, in recent times, four women were brutally killed following the practice of witchcraft in Jharkhand\(^3\). The problem of witchcraft is not only present in India; it is a worldwide social evil. As Michael D. Bailey observes: witchcraft is a historical concept which is still predominant not only in the European countries, but also in other countries of the world. Witchcraft has existed virtually in every human culture throughout the history. The concept is highly contingent on
historical time and place. Those who are afraid of this reality and are superstitious, consider it as a set of actions, practices and behaviour performed by certain people to supposedly terrible effect. But those who are skeptical of witchcraft consider it as a construct in the minds of certain people who would use such practices as an excuse to persecute others for different reasons. According to him, a gradual decline in the large scale practice of with hunting was seen in Europe mostly in the 18th century, but the belief in the reality of witchcraft is still occupying the minds of people (2003: xxi – xxiii).

The representation of various forms of violence in Getting Away with Murder is of wider contemporary relevance as these instances of violence against women are still prevalent in Indian society despite the unprecedented “modern” growth that the society has seen in various fields. But women’s position/condition more or less remains the same as it used to be in the past. They are still the victims of gendered violence in society. Perhaps what is more important is the acquisition of a modern mind-set (both by men and women) to counter such instances of violence against women as suggested by Mehta in this play. The emergence of a somewhat different frame of mind in the male world – the mentality to support women and transform their present condition as merely objects to be controlled - is portrayed through the characters like Anil and Gopal. In the play Anil supports Sonali to recover herself from the painful memories of her past. On the other hand Gopal also does a lot to practically help the victims of witch killing; he even jointly plans with Malu to adopt Minzari’s daughter (Minzari was beaten to death after being declared a witch). Getting Away with Murder can be considered as a woman conscious play as it pays attention to the various forms of violence experienced by women, and also the factors responsible for the occurrence of such violence. The play reveals the playwright’s thoughtful observation of the actual realities concerning women.
Brides are not for Burning

*Brides are not for Burning* is another woman conscious play by Dina Mehta. The play is an indictment of the dowry system which is still prevalent in the Indian society. It represents how this system is one of the major causes of violence targeted against women. The system of dowry relegates women not merely to an object of possession but also of purchase. A woman can be bought in the name of marriage and discarded/killed if she fails to satisfy the buyer; who could be any male.

The play centers on the story of Laxmi, a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by her in-laws for not being able to fulfill their demand for dowry. Laxmi is dead when the play begins. In the entire play, Dina Mehta hardly provides any scope for visual enactment of the scene of her death, except in the last scene where Mehta mentions in the stage direction that Laxmi’s death by fire can be enacted behind the screen, as a silhouette. That Laxmi was burnt alive strategically by her in-laws is only represented by means of verbal signs. Perhaps, the playwright thinks that such kind representation is a necessity on stage to desensitize the issue. Otherwise, the scope for visual enactment of this scene may actually create a negative impact in the audience’s mind. The same manner of representation is also noticeable in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* where she does not provide scope for the visual enactment of the scene of sexual violence against that unknown woman. Mehta and Padmanabhan both seem to conform to Slavoj Žižek formulations on representation of violence, which I have already cited in detail in the second chapter of this dissertation. Žižek in *Violence: Six Sideways*, says that the truthful representation of violence can be more effective than the unconcealed description of violence. According to him, a distinction needs to be made between truth (factual) and truthfulness. He cites the
example of a report on a raped woman or any other narratives of trauma and says that what renders such a report truthful is its factual unreliability, its confusion and its inconsistencies. The representation that allows variations in representation of violence and also keeps respect for the victim is the appropriate means of representation (2009:3).

Unlike *Getting Away with Murder*, in *Brides are not for Burning* Mehta provides considerable stage directions. Mehta herself divides the entire acting area into five separate parts which includes the Desai tenement, Sanjay’s living room, Vinod’s office, Tarla’s kitchen and the living-cum-dining room of Laxmi’s in-laws. The equipments needed for each of these areas are also mentioned by the playwright. The happenings in the above mentioned five parts are directly or indirectly connected to the main plot which is centered on Laxmi’s death. The beginning takes place at the Desai tenement with the presence of two characters on stage – Laxmi’s father and her sister Malini. The spot light on Laxmi’s father distinctly reveals his old age and broken health. From the conversation between Malini and her father, the reader/audience can sense what happened to Laxmi. Laxmi is forced by her mother-in-law to burn herself and later on, this horrible crime was labelled as an accident:

Malini: Good. I’m waiting to hear the verdict.

Anil: Accident

Malini: (grimly) I see. They decided Laxmi’s sari was soaked in kerosene by accident. A match was set to it by accident. (1993:15)

Malini refuses to accept her sister Laxmi’s death as an accident while Anil seems to be convinced and satisfied by the verdict. In Malini’s character, Mehta portrays the image of a conscious and educated woman who can sense the dangerous consequences of not providing an adequate amount of dowry. Through Malini’s speech, Mehta lays bare the large scale of dowry deaths that are named as “intended
killings” or accidents: Malini says to Anil: “...Last year 350 women died of burns. This city alone, some of them over-insured” (1993:15). The same happens to Laxmi who is insured just before she is strategically murdered:

Anil: For God's sake, the Marfatia family is in no need of money. And we do not even know that Laxmi was insured.
Malini: We do as a matter of fact. Early this year, Laxmi told me so herself. (1993:16)

For Malini, the evidence of insuring Laxmi’s life is significant; in fact it can be considered as sign signifying the “pre-intention” of killing Laxmi. The main cause of insuring Laxmi’s life for rupees eighty thousand was to kill her strategically and get back that amount.

In Act I itself, Mehta describes the abuses Laxmi undergoes after marriage and also the brutality with which she is killed. Although apparently Laxmi’s in-laws show no interest in dowry, behind the scene the whole household tortures her physically and psychologically. She is abused emotionally by her sisters-in-law who insult her saying that a “Goddess of Wealth” has entered into their home with clothes appropriate to those worn by a servant and jewelery not worthy of her name. Everyday Laxmi has to face her mother in-law’s continuous accusation against her father for not fulfilling their demands. Supplementing to these acts of emotional violence against Laxmi, her husband joins her mother instead of supporting his wife. The perpetrators in Laxmi’s case are not men alone; she cannot be defined as a victim of domestic violence by her male partner. Rather, the women characters in her surrounding play the major part in driving her to death. They, by executing violence on Laxmi in this context, indulge in the act of propagating the patriarchal ideologies.
Laxmi’s unexpected tragic death affects not only Malini, but Anil and their father. In Act I, scene (ii), Mehta describes the effect of this violent act upon their father. While playing cards with Anil, Laxmi’s father constantly speaks about the nature of death caused by fire: “I read somewhere that death by fire is quicker than it seems” (1993:32). As per the stage directions in the play, during this conversation with Anil, Laxmi’s father expresses a childlike anxiety, pauses blankly, weeps and finally freezes on stage after uttering these words: “They let her burn, they let us burn, my daughter...The swine, the swine...” (1993:33). The enactment of such physical behaviour along with the dialogues on stage may more powerfully represent the image of a grief-stricken father. Mehta not only represents the impact of violence on the victim, but also projects its subsequent impact on the entire family of the victim.

More facts about Laxmi’s death come to light when Malu meets Tarla in Act I, scene (ii). Tarla is the woman who gives false witness in the court under compulsion. On that specific date before Laxmi locks her in the kitchen and attempts to kill her, Tarla was present there. When Laxmi was about to visit a Saher Baba with Vinod to get rid of her supposed barrenness, her mother-in-law again subjects her to intense verbal abuse. She says that Laxmi’s barrenness is the result of her past misdeeds and Laxmi would never be able to overcome it. But in reality the fault lies in Vinod; who turns out to be an impotent male. As Tarala says:

Tarla: And she called Laxmi a cheat because her father had defrauded them...And she called her an ingrate because though she had entered their home a pauper, as a daughter-in-law she’d failed in her duty to the family and her husband—set fire to the hopes and his illustrious name and thrown the ashes in his face!

Malini: (shaken) God! She said that!

Tarla: That was when Laxmi ran to the kitchen and locked herself in. (1993:70)
When Laxmi sets herself on fire and the smell of burning escapes, Vinod, Arjun and Kalu knock on the door; Tarla shouts begging Laxmi to open the door. But the mother-in-law prevents them all to break open the door and save Laxmi. When Arjun, one of her sons wants to break the door, she said: “Let her finish what she has started inside there…” (1993:80). Hereby Mehta seems to draw attention to the various trajectories through which patriarchal ideologies work in society. The dowry system in a sense is a product patriarchy which completely devalues women. Instead of rescuing Laxmi from the trap of the dowry system, her mother-in-law serves the purpose of patriarchy by encouraging systematic violence hurled on women by the dowry system. And Vinod, like an obedient child follows his mother to kill his own wife.

The root of Laxmi’s victimisation goes back to her past. In her childhood Laxmi is deprived of her education. As Anil points out, Laxmi could not even complete her schooling although she was the brightest among all the children. Partly she is the victim of gender discrimination that necessarily places restrictions on a female child in terms of education also. Laxmi’s father also bears a similar attitude towards her. Besides, he also believes in the traditional idea of woman as merely objects of producing a child. The way Laxmi’s father describes his two wives is horrible:

Father: ....Her hips were wide, some women are made for child bearing...unlike poor Sujata....But she miscarried each time she became pregnant...I sent her away after ten years and six miscarriages...but your mother was curved like a Goddess... (1993:14)

This speech is more than sufficient to understand the plight of those two women (although they do not appear on stage). They are treated by Laxmi’s father as simply objects to be controlled and used physically, mentally and sexually. He sends Sujata off as she miscarries each time. The number of times Sujata is pregnant undeniably
signifies the brutalities she undergoes in her marital relationship. Laxmi's own mother is compelled to produce a great number of children which affects her health; this is evident Malini's speech when she says: "Because with Mother always pregnant and ailing, she had to baby-sit for us..." (1993:17). Hence, Laxmi has to sit at home looking after her sisters and brothers and give up her education.

Since Laxmi is uneducated, she becomes more vulnerable to violence consequently. Her lack of proper education gives her father some mount of tension as he thinks it would be difficult to marry her off. So despite the dowry demands made by Vinod's family, he decides to marry Laxmi into that family. In a sense, the root of Laxmi's sufferings lies in the irrational sexual behaviour exhibited by her father in the past. He had a large number of children and then failed to take proper care of them. These are revelations made by Mehta about the complex network of factors leading to the sufferings of Laxmi and by extension all women in general.

Not only the family which follows the patriarchal notion of women as mere objects of subjection and controls them via various violent means; but the legal system also follows the norms of patriarchy to control women. The legal system participates in perpetrating the same sometimes through their indifferent outlook and at other times by their biased attitude. In Brides are not for Burning, Mehta exposes this legal bias through the powerful dialogues of Malini:

Malini: I spit on your law courts. Plaything in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor. (1993:18)

The same biased nature of the legal system is also noticeable in Silence! The Court is in Session by Vijay Tendulkar while representing the story of Leela Benare. Besides, this system also marginalises the lower class/caste people as noticeable in the case of
people belonging to Adivasi and Harijan classes. This realistic portrayal of the true nature of the legal system indicates the playwright's acute understanding of this system, its functioning and its failure in delivering justice.

It is not only Laxmi who is a victim of gendered violence in the play; but Malini who is educated and stronger than Laxmi, also has to go through profound emotional violence. The shock of her sister Laxmi's death and the subsequent happenings create deep psychological wounds in Malini. Then Malini faces Sanjay's betrayal. Sanjay reduces her into an object of fulfilling his sexual needs and finally refuses to marry her. All these drive her into a hysterical state. Malini almost loses her mental balance, becomes hysterical and produces shrill laughter. She is then seen sobbing on stage. Enactment of these non-verbal signs along with her dialogues on stage can turn her into a visual/sensory image representing her trauma. The audience can directly perceive the ongoing war in her from her bodily movements and gestures. Out of such a complex mental state, she decides to surrender to Sanjay's sexual hunger. And this pleases him so much that like a wild beast he says:

Sanjay: (thickly) Come, come, Malu...I have a mad need of you ...there is wolf in me tonight... (his hands all over her). (1993:52)

The financial limitations of her family, her realisation that "To be born a female is to be born into servitude", and finally Sanjay's betrayal drive her crazy. The emotional violence that Malini undergoes is less overt, but it is so effective that at one point in her life she is suicidal: "...For me there are only other betrayals, so that if I had a gun just now, I would have turned it on me" (1993:86). We sense self-hatred in her as she says: "...Because a part of me despises myself" (1993:87). Out of this growing sense of disappointment, she decides to leave with Roy, one of the members of the revolutionary group, who believes in bringing about change through violence.
But finally she stops and realises that there is not much difference between people like Roy and Sanjay and their attitude towards women. Roy turns out to be an equally authoritarian persona. As evident from the stage direction, Roy not only abuses her verbally, but hurts her physically:

Malini: you are hurting my arm.
Roy: *(applying more pressure)* It is meant to hurt. Why don’t you cry out? Why don’t you scream? I’ve never heard you scream, Malini. *(1993:93)*

Only Anil helps her in getting back her self-confidence. Finally Malini decides to resume her education. This may be considered as a sign suggesting her “coming out” of the claustrophobic male world of betrayal. She overthrows the constraints of patriarchal setting and fights back the abuses she receives as a female; while her sister Laxmi accepts those abuses silently and passively. The playwright seems to suggest that education can bring some change in women’s response to the acts of abuses they experience.

Tarla also occupies a marginalised position in her conjugal relationship. Even she becomes a pawn in the game played by the Vinod’s family. As her husband recovers his lost job with the help of Vinod, so out gratitude he becomes a slave to Vinod’s family. During the inquest Tarla is compelled by her husband to give false witness. And after the inquest she is not allowed to talk freely by her husband. When Malini asks her about Laxmi’s death, Taral’s reply is: “I am not supposed to talk about it anymore” *(1993:68)*. She is not allowed to exercise her autonomy; her freedom of speech is curbed. Her husband will be violent with her if he gets to know that Tarla has been discussing it with anyone. Besides, Mehta also highlights how poverty can compel one like Tarala to turn blind eye to ideas of morality and goodness and to become complicit in crime.
Tarla: Because we must live too, Malini... Things have been not so good.
There were days with no food in the house when he was without a
job. (imploringly) We have to live, too! (1993:71)

Tarla seems to be in a complex situation and fails to take a decisive step. As she has a
child too, she is bound to be dependant on her husband's income. Mehta seems to
imply that economic empowerment is important for women to assert their self.
Perhaps, had Tarla been economically independent, she would have tried to overcome
her compulsion (Tarla’s dialogues are indicative of the good friendship she had with
Laxmi) and could have been able to protest against the violence done to Laxmi.
Another woman Geeta (who does not appear on stage) is to be left by her husband
Roy for not being able to give up her attachment with her parental family. Almost all
the women characters in the play are subject to different forms of physical and
psychological violence that span a whole spectrum of categories which I have
discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. Their sufferings differ only in degrees.
They are victims of the same gender discriminations which the patriarchal setting of
the Indian society promotes.

Violence represented in the theatre is not a new phenomenon; however, it did
not find expression in the way that it does now. The growing self-awareness among
women about their own condition along with education and empowerment (to a
degree) has enabled them to speak up openly about their lives. The emergence of the
women writers in the field of drama is suggestive of this emergent voice – their own
voice through which they dare to represent as well as question their own surrounding.
Apart from Dina Mehta and Manjula Padmanabhan, writers like Poile Sengupta, Usha
Ganguli and many others have started scripting plays concerning women’s lives in
Indian society.
The choice of drama as a means of self-expression by women playwrights is significant; it can contribute to bring change in the thoughts of people. Drama has an added advantage—it has the scope for enactment, which again helps in better understanding of the issues contained in the text. Performance can also have a strong impact in the audience’s mind which may in turn lead to consciousness raising and subsequent activism. Enactment of serious and thought-provoking plays like Brides are not for Burning, Getting Away with Murder and Lights Out can certainly compel the audience to contemplate over the issue of violence against women.

Endnotes

1 PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a psychological disturbance that occurs after observing, experiencing or being involved in a severely traumatic or horrifying event. In many cases the survivors of child sexual abuse suffer from post traumatic stress disorder which is an outcome of undergoing deep psychological/physical violence in the past.


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