

Patriarchy and Gender Discrimination in Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*

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<p>Received: 30 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 28 Sep 2025; Accepted: 02 Oct 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Gender discrimination, patriarchy, dowry, feminist theory, silence, domestic space, symbolism.</p>	<p><i>Dina Mehta's play Brides Are Not for Burning presents a critical exploration of the pervasive structures of patriarchy and the systemic gender discrimination embedded within Indian society. This study examines how Mehta's narrative foregrounds the struggles of women subjected to societal expectations, oppressive customs, and domestic subjugation. Through a close reading of the play, the research highlights the ways in which patriarchal norms manifest in both public and private spheres, perpetuating gender inequality and restricting women's autonomy. The analysis also underscores the playwright's use of dialogue, characterization, and dramatic conflict to expose the socio-cultural mechanisms that enforce female marginalization. By situating the play within the broader discourse on gender studies and feminist theory, this paper emphasizes the enduring relevance of Mehta's work in critiquing societal inequities and advocating for women's empowerment. The study ultimately demonstrates that Brides Are Not for Burning not only mirrors the gendered realities of its time but also challenges audiences to confront and question entrenched patriarchal practices..</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* stands as a landmark in Indian English drama for its concentrated focus on dowry-related violence and the more pervasive, subtler mechanisms of gender discrimination that sustain it. Written in the late 1970s—a time when India was increasingly grappling with a rising incidence of dowry deaths—the play condenses social reality into a tightly observed domestic tableau. Within a single household, Mehta stages a range of gendered behaviors: overt physical abuse, economic coercion, social shaming, intergenerational enforcement of gender norms, and the social silencing of the victim. While the play's title is a polemical denunciation of the most extreme form of gendered violence—bride-burning—it also invites

an examination of the less spectacular but equally deadly practices that make such violence conceivable.

This paper interrogates gender discrimination in Mehta's play along several related axes: the structural mechanisms of patriarchy (how it functions through both men and women), dowry and domestic violence as manifestations of gendered economic coercion, the dialectic of voice and silence, the promise and limitations of education and progressive allies, and the play's symbolic deployment of fire. Drawing on feminist theory—particularly the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Gayatri Spivak, and Judith Butler—this study reads *Brides Are Not for Burning* as both a product of its historical moment and as a text that offers enduring insights into the reproduction of gender inequality. The methodology is a textual and

contextual close reading, combining careful analysis of dialogue, stage directions, and imagery with theoretical frameworks that help elucidate the social structures the play represents.

Situating the Play: Historical Context and Critical Overview

Although this paper focuses on textual analysis, it is necessary to sketch briefly the socio-historical backdrop against which Mehta wrote. The 1970s and early 1980s in India saw increased public visibility of dowry-related deaths—a phenomenon that sparked both legal responses and public outcry. However, legal measures alone could not uproot deeply embedded social practices. The family continued to be a crucial site for the reproduction of gender norms and, paradoxically, for the enforcement of violence in the name of honor and economic exchange.

Critically, Mehta's play departs from sensationalist treatments of dowry deaths by staging the domestic idioms that produce them. The husband is frequently off-stage; it is the conversations among women and between women and ostensibly progressive men that expose the mechanics of oppression. By focusing on ordinary talk, customary silences, and the interior economies of a household, Mehta shows that gender discrimination is rarely only spectacular—it is ordinary, routinized, and therefore all the more pernicious.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three interrelated strands of feminist theory inform the reading that follows.

1. **Gender as a Social Construct and the Othering of Women.** Simone de Beauvoir's account of women as the historically constituted "Other" provides a philosophical backdrop: the social practices in Mehta's play mark women as dependent, secondary, and defined by relational identities (wife, daughter-in-law). The play visualizes how social structures naturalize these relational roles.
2. **Patriarchy as Institutional and Cultural.** Kate Millet's concept of patriarchy as embedded in social institutions, sexual politics, and cultural narratives helps read Mehta's

depiction of the family as an apparatus that reproduces male authority through customs such as dowry and the ideology of honor.

3. **Subalternity, Voice, and Representation.** Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" invites attention to who in the play is permitted to speak, whose speech is heard or discounted, and how dominance shapes representation. The victimized bride in Mehta's play is emblematic of a subaltern whose language is muted by structural power.
4. **Gender Performance and Repetition.** Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity aids in understanding how gendered behaviors are iterative acts—repeated and naturalized until they appear essential. Mehta's characters perform gendered roles (the dutiful mother, the silent bride, the outspoken educated woman) in ways that reinforce or contest social expectations.

Together, these frameworks direct analysis away from individual pathology and toward systemic and cultural patterns.

III. METHODOLOGY: CLOSE READING AND DRAMATIC ANALYSIS

This study employs close reading as a method suited to drama: attention to dialogue, stage directions, pauses, and spatial arrangements reveals how the play enacts social relations. Because Mehta carefully controls what is spoken, what is hinted at, and who is present or absent on stage, analyzing these formal elements uncovers the play's critique. Where appropriate, the paper draws on historical context and feminist theory to deepen the analysis, but primary emphasis remains on the text itself.

IV. ANALYSIS

Patriarchy as a System: The Domestic Microcosm

Mehta's dramaturgy makes the household a microcosm of larger patriarchal society. The father-figure and husband are not always present physically, yet their authority saturates the household. This absence is strategic: patriarchy's power does not need constant direct assertion; its norms become

internalized and enacted by household members. Laxmi, the mother, is a central figure in this reproduction. Her insistence that daughters must “adjust” to marital life and not “bring shame” explicitly demonstrates intergenerational complicity. Laxmi’s language—framed as pragmatism and preservation of family honor—functions as a mechanism that locates responsibility for resistance in the woman rather than in the system that abuses her.

Simone de Beauvoir’s notion that women are defined in relation to men helps explain the moral economy in which Laxmi operates: a wife’s obligations are prioritized as the normative center of feminine identity. Laxmi’s position is tragic and ambivalent—she is both subject to patriarchal constraints and an agent who enforces them. This double role complicates simple victim-perpetrator binaries, revealing how gender discrimination persists when those it hurts help to sustain it.

Dowry and Domestic Violence: Economic Coercion and Social Legitimacy

Dowry functions in the play not simply as an economic transaction but as a social script that legitimizes control and violence. Mehta’s title alone is a political statement: it is an assertion of refusal against the ritualized destruction of women in the pursuit of monetary ends. The play dramatizes how dowry creates a power imbalance that justifies harassment and, in extreme cases, murder. Alka’s experience—constant harassment, emotional terror, and eventual physical assault—embodies the link between economic pressures and gendered violence.

What is particularly striking is how everyday conversations normalize this abuse. Family members often treat incidents as “private matters” to be handled discreetly, thereby foreclosing legal or public remedies. This normalization operates through a discourse of honor and reputation that elevates communal image over individual safety. Kate Millett’s analysis of patriarchy’s normative cultural values is relevant here: the family, as an institution, is the site where sexual politics are reproduced, and dowry becomes a ritualized instrument for maintaining gender hierarchies.

Voice and Silence: The Semiotics of Speech

One of Mehta’s central dramaturgical devices is the juxtaposition of voice and silence. Alka’s silence—her

reluctance or inability to speak her suffering in full—is profoundly revealing. Silence here is not mere lack of speech but a social sign: it indexes a lack of social power. Gayatri Spivak’s provocation about the voice of the subaltern is useful: Alka’s speech, even when it occasionally surfaces, tends to be dismissed or reframed by stronger interlocutors. Malini’s outspoken critique and Nikhil’s sympathetic statements frame the parameters of acceptable discourse; yet, neither fully resolves Alka’s condition.

The play thus stages a tragic irony: those who can speak (Malini, Nikhil) cannot always effect change, and the one whose life is most imperiled (Alka) lacks the discursive currency to be heard. This split underscores structural inequalities in access to public discourse. The play also complicates the assumption that giving a voice is automatically emancipatory. Speech, when isolated from institutional power, may remain ineffectual.

Education, Agency, and Their Limits

Malini’s education and moral clarity position her as the play’s primary dissenting voice. She articulates the injustice of the family’s moral calculus and mobilizes language that names the abuse. Her character illustrates that education can produce critical consciousness and ethical refusal. Yet Mehta is careful to show the limits of education as a panacea. Malini’s speeches, however sharp, are insufficient to dismantle household power dynamics. She cannot prevent Alka’s suffering alone.

This limitation points to a core argument: individual enlightenment is necessary but not sufficient for systemic change. Progressive men like Nikhil may express sympathy, but often their intervention stops at moral condemnation rather than structural redress. Thus, the play insists upon collective struggle and institutional reform as prerequisites for meaningful transformation.

Women as Enforcers of Patriarchy

An illuminating and unsettling aspect of the play is the role of women in perpetuating gender norms. Laxmi’s insistence on conformity and family honor is emblematic of how patriarchal values are reproduced by women who have internalized them. This dynamic aligns with Butler’s theory of gender performativity: gendered behaviors are repeated acts that become embodied as “natural.” Over time, acceptance of

unequal roles becomes habituated. Women, conditioned to uphold familial continuity and social respectability, may resist changes that threaten their own limited security or social standing.

This intergenerational enforcement complicates calls for simple solidarity among women across age groups. Mehta's play asks the audience to acknowledge the painful reality that oppression is often maintained by those who, themselves, have been oppressed. It also prompts the question: how might feminist praxis account for such internalized compliance while building alliances that transcend generational and class divides?

Symbolism of Fire: Destruction and Resistance

Fire in Mehta's play operates on multiple levels: literal, symbolic, and political. Literally, fire represents the method by which dowry deaths occur. Symbolically, it stands for purification, rage, annihilation, and the potential for transformation. The play's rhetorical move – reclaiming the image of fire – invites a double reading: while fire has been used to destroy women, the language of burning can also be appropriated as a metaphor for righteous anger and refusal.

Mehta's imagery of the kitchen and domestic hearth becomes subversive; objects of care and sustenance are inverted into instruments of control. This inversion signals how domestic spaces, conventionally coded as feminine and nurturing, can be converted into mechanisms of harm. Yet the redemptive possibility in the play lies in reorienting passion and energy toward resistance: if fire becomes emblematic of protest, the narrative shifts from victimization to contestation.

V. DISCUSSION

Reading *Brides Are Not for Burning* through feminist theory clarifies how gender discrimination is not merely an outcome of individual cruelty but a structural, cultural, and performative system. The play's strength lies in rendering ordinary acts – conversation, silence, household management – into sites of analytic significance. Mehta's text cautions against simplistic binaries: women are not only victims or heroines; they may be complicit, constrained, and yet capable of radical critique.

The play also raises enduring questions about the efficacy of legal reforms when cultural logics remain unchanged. Dowry laws and punitive measures can target criminal acts, but until the everyday moral frameworks that privilege family honor over women's safety are contested, laws will have limited purchase. Mehta's dramatization suggests that social transformation requires both discursive shifts (changing how abuse is talked about) and institutional changes (creating enforceable protections, altering economic incentives).

Significantly, the play anticipates debates in contemporary feminist thought: intersectionality, the politics of representation, and the ethics of speaking for others. Alka's near-silence demands careful ethical reflection about how activism and speech can avoid co-opting the subaltern voice while still advocating effectively. Mehta neither erases Alka nor makes her solely a symbol; instead, the play complicates representation by showing the limits of sympathetic speech when not tethered to collective power.

VI. CONCLUSION

Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a compact yet profound indictment of gender discrimination as it operates within Indian familial structures. Through skillful use of drama – contrasting voices, deliberate silences, symbolic domestic spaces, and the recurring motif of fire – Mehta reveals how patriarchy is reproduced, enforced, and sometimes contested. The play asks uncomfortable questions about female complicity, the limits of education, and the moral regimes that prioritize honor over safety. It insists that combating gender discrimination requires more than moral outrage: it demands structural change, public accountability, and cultural transformation.

As contemporary societies continue to confront domestic violence, dowry-related crimes, and the everyday discriminations that make such crimes possible, Mehta's play remains a vital text for understanding the complex weave of belief, habit, and power that sustains gendered inequality. It is at once a historically situated drama and an enduring feminist mirror.

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