We have been the great followers of tradition, rituals and customs in Indian cultural machinery which is glorious in its gender-patterning family set up shared by all diverse classes, masses, castes and communities. The parents of Daughters, condemned to debt, shame and vulnerability are the upholders of pride owned by the parents of Sons as if their son is the last hero on this earth. The inheritance of family name, property and prestige is carried on only by sons and not by daughters.

The daughters are to be married off as early as possible after their puberty as a sign of the respectable family in conservative set up so much so that the Indian parents can proudly boast of successfully performing their filial duties. For a young bride who dreams of a happily married life, the traditional Indian families in our “modernizing” society still have the shocking bequest of serialized torture that shall end only in the finale of death when the bride is set ablaze by her in-laws, who are vindictive on account of the dowry they did not receive.

Soon after the event like marriage in the family, the in-laws start pressing their demands in cash or commodity as a car, a motorcycle, a flat, a plot of land and so on. When the parents of the bride fail to meet their demands, the housewife is subjected to severe physical torture, allegedly by her husband and mother-in-law and whosoever. The bride as usual, is trained to be a silent sufferer as she has to become the ideal “Bahu” to escape bringing shame to her parents.

A woman in Indian family is perfectly taught to surrender and be submissive from her childhood on the pure grounds of ‘virtue’ essentially feminine and she is threateningly cautioned about how the slightest mistake in her behavior can “cut off the nose” to say that exactly in the domestic idiom, and how the fame of the family can be smashed into dust for which she will of course not be forgiven throughout her life.

It is easy enough for the in-laws in this situation to horrify the smartly trained girl and bring the whole trauma at its height in burning the bride and prove the case as of accident, suicide or mishap unintended. The newspapers and the police share parties and refuse to flash the authentic reports. The Dowry harassment declares life of countless daughters compelled by their parents to guzzle the poisonous relationship only to lighten the ‘burden’ of “having daughters” from the shoulders of their parents. Dina Mehta’s play takes up the issue to question some hidden issues around the cases of dowry deaths in India.

Mehta finds it a complex web of issues, in fact, including the unemployed and misguided youth, the missionary agencies spreading fanaticism, the senior citizen’s plight as a parent, the lack of self-esteem in the aggressive beggars of dowry and the helplessness of an isolated young bride amidst the lost people around her. The title of the play declares an anti-dowry slogan in the apparently feminist, ethically humanist voice of the author.
Young married women are vulnerable, in the ‘arranged’ marriages in ritualistic Indian society deeply concerned with the issues of status, caste, sub-caste, class and religion etc. Financial back up is, by default, central to the ‘transactions’ between the families of the bride and groom. It is an important history to display and observe how much is ‘given’ by the bride’s family and how grandly the groom’s family (pitifully, in fact) celebrated the ‘receiving’ right of the groom.

After marriage, the wife is to play all roles like a servant, nurse, caretaker of the house and cook forever. Moreover if she works, she is a source of income, though she cannot claim any special significance in her relationships with the members of her new household as she is not based in this house by birth. Around 60 percent of women are married before the legal age of 18. Illiteracy among women is high, in all rural areas up to 75 percent.

As a result they are isolated and trapped in matrimony like a helpless puppet and are never in a position to assert their identity or freedom as individuals. Demands for dowry can go on for years. Religious ceremonies and the birth of children often become the occasions for further requests for money or goods. The lack of providing for these demands only invites more abuse and persecution to the bride. In the worst cases, wives are simply killed to make way for one more financial transaction through another marriage.

The play is intended to re-affirm the sense of protest in a theatrical form to resist the violence against women in the license of tradition, marriage as an institution and family as a place to serve and fulfill the duties. The beginning of the drama overwhelms the melancholy of the family mourning the death of their eldest daughter Laxmi. The news of a married daughter’s death is spread as a case of suicide for unknown causes, inviting multiple guesses about how the daughter-in-law must have been tormented by her in-laws for wringing more money and possessions from her parental home.

The play unearths how the gendered subaltern victim passively accepted the oppressive stances of society in the form of domination worked out by her father and brother before marriage for escaping the so-feared social dishonor of the family and after marriage the sneering and insults of in-laws as she is not able to fulfill their unending orders. She is treated as a puppet, an outsider, a slave and finally a useless object of throw.

Mehta raises a question mark on the responsibility of parents, in-laws, siblings and most obviously that of the wedded partner. What can be worse than ignoring the sanctity and dignity of a relationship that claims the centre of human existence in the context of family, society along with the personal life? The social issues related to a woman’s life actually begin in her childhood for the simple reason that her parents are ignorant of how to bring up a girl-child as to make her strong and bold enough to face all crisis in her future life.

The play grounds in a story of some middle class Gujarati family that represents the majority of domestic set ups in India. The narrative also shifts outside the closed spaces of the Desai family, moving to other places like the living room of Sanjay - the family friend, office of Vinod –the husband, kitchen of Tarla -the neighbor of in-laws, apartment of Roy – the visitor and the opening room of in-laws’ house.
The plot of the play is surrounds an event which is the compulsive suicide of Laxmi, the bride. This is presented as an accident and the investigating agency seems to confirm its accidental nature. Malini, sister of the victim Laxmi, tries her best to detect the facts behind her sister’s so-described ‘suicide’ but she gets no help from her family members, especially her brother Anil nor any from society in general which is, Laxmi’s friend Tarla, Malini’s boyfriend Sanjay.

Though she succeeds in uncovering the truth, she does not find any way to bring justice to her dead sister and prove the murder worth punishment and stop the chain of such murders in the burning practice of burning brides….! Laxmi as the eldest daughter had to stop her own studies in preference to taking care of the younger siblings. She is married off by her typical middle-class father who gives her dowry beating his capacity but her in-laws, in spite of being prosperous begin to persecute her for extracting more from her parental home.

After five years of her marriage they start blaming her for bearing no child. Her husband is impotent, but she is considered as unable to conceive. The tragic and pathetic tale of Laxmi is not only her own suffering, but it is the part of numberless women’s lives whose sufferings in Indian Patriarchy strike the playwright’s sensitivity and she feels compelled to look at the domestic violence in a broader perspective.

It is our patriarchal social arrangement which has marginalized woman within and without home as subordinate, slave, servant and what not. A woman’s social respectability is resolved by her relationships to men. A daughter is known by the name of her father and a wife by the name of her husband. Gender manifestation in our society is omnipresent in such ways that most of us are not even aware of their gender-rooted expressions in language, norms and conduct.

Social thinkers like Marx observed the oppression of women as attributed to the materialization of personal property. Starting in conjugation with manipulative class relations, the alteration resulted in the oppression of women in various forms inside and outside the socio-familial world that has persisted even today.

The play emphasizes society’s answer to the issue of bride-burning through lack of action which seeps into each and every stratum of society. Malini, the inconsolable sister of Laxmi puts an effort to bring justice to her dead sister but the responses of Anil, her brother and others make it clear how the society would like to wear the garb of silence after of inhuman act of bride-burning has been committed. This is clear from what Anil states

Come on Malu. She is gone now. Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress.

Malini: But not beyond retribution”

(Mehta 1993:18)
Moreover, her boyfriend, Sanjay, too discourages her in speaking against or digging into the case of her elder sister.

Sanjay: I told you, these things are best forgotten.
Be reasonable, Malu”.         (Mehta 1993:51)

The relationship between Malini and Sanjay typically holds the hope of the girl to get married to the person she loves. Sanjay without losing more time tells her about his aging father’s wish to find a match for him and also declares his decision to be an obedient son. Malini has nowhere to look for and she does not know how to face this disillusionment. Not an exceptional situation in Indian set up, the beloved has to suffer after she surrenders to the man she loves.

She has to pay the heavy cost of her seeking a right man for herself while a boy has freedom to find as many girls as he would to involve and disown as per his convenience in the name of tradition, father’s wish, mother’s desire, family prestige, caste and so on. The lover in the play replays the same duplicate role of blaming the beloved after exploiting her to his whims, Sanjay: “Why did you? You usually tell him you’re spending the night at a girlfriend’s. Have you suddenly decided to embrace sanyas?” (Mehta 1993:41)

The peak of the things happening to Malini is faced by her when she witnesses the Indian legal system collaborating to prove Laxmi’s suicide as an accident. Malini: I spit on your law courts! Playthings in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor” (Mehta 1993:18)

The defeat of women in is a declared fact in Indian society and Law through the frustrated cases of women like Malini who fight for the loss but cannot really help themselves from losing their own prestige and strength. Her relationship with her family members shows her weak positioning as a daughter while her incapability to fight against the injustice to her dead sister proves the failure of Indian Law in all its democratic claims.

The anti-dowry laws in India were enacted in 1961 but both parties to the dowry, the families of the husband and wife are criminalized. The laws have done nothing to halt dowry transactions and the violence that is often associated with them. Police and the courts are notorious for turning a blind eye to cases of violence against women and dowry associated deaths.

It was not until 1983 that domestic violence became punishable by law. Some of the reasons for the under-reporting are obvious. As women are reluctant to report threats and abuse to the police for fear of retaliation against themselves and their families. In India there is an added hindrance. Any attempt to seek police involvement in disputes over dowry transactions may result in members of the woman’s own family being subject to criminal proceedings and potentially imprisoned.

Moreover, police action is unlikely to stop the demands for dowry payments. Many of the victims are burnt to death; they are doused in kerosene and set light to. Routinely the in-laws...
claim that what happened was simply an accident. The kerosene stoves used in many poorer households are dangerous. When evidence of foul play is too obvious to ignore, the story changes to suicide, the wife, it is said, could not adjust to new family life and subsequently killed herself.

What kind of protection does the Law offer married women? The husband is supposed to be her protector and when the husband kills her, who is going to blame whom? The Law has no answer for the dead woman’s questions and the family members can only scream and madden in their loss of the daughter, as Malini feels the helplessness....!

All the newspapers that sensationalize the news of dowry death or bride-burning in some place in India, do not absolutely bother about what happened next, to the criminals who shared that shameful burning of the bride. How many of those get punished by the law, or even sued by the family of the girl?

Additionally, the play has repercussions of the elder sister’s death on the younger one. Malini’s disillusionment in love with Sanjay resulting in painful breakup misleads her towards Roy and his messy thoughts of radical revolution in society. Roy is an extremist, misleading a group of youngsters who do not find a proper setup after their education. He supports and comforts Malini for bringing an unbelievable Utopian revolution.

She believes in him and preserves the illegal weapons at her home in trunks. She is ready also to provide help to Roy in his mission yet, within a short while she realizes that it was probably her attempt to replace one kind of servitude for another. Finally she takes a sensible decision to stay at home and edify her life. This wisdom has taken a long time and a painful journey through her experiences of deception by others:

I see now that if I follow you, I only exchange one servitude for another. The boot in the face for a place in the kitchen; Brides will not stop burning when you take over the world, Roy. All I can learn from you are new dishonesties, so GO” (Mehta 1993:94)!

Domestic violence against women is certainly not isolated to India. The official rate of domestic violence is significantly lower than in the US, for example, where, according to UN statistics, a woman is battered somewhere in the country on average once every 15 seconds. In all countries this violence is bound up with a mixture of cultural backwardness that relegates women to an inferior status combined with the tensions produced by the pressures growing economic uncertainty and want.

In India, however, where capitalism has fashioned out of the traditions of dowry a particularly exposed nexus between marriage and money, and where the pressures of mundane life are being heightened by broadening social split, the violence takes correspondingly brutal and grotesque forms.
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