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VIDYASAGAR UNIVERSITY
Midnapore, West Bengal, India



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S.B.S.S. Mahavidyalaya, Goaltore
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Representation of Violence and Quest for Emancipation: A Reading of Dina Mehta's *Getting Away With Murder*

Arup Ratan Chakraborty

Abstract

Women's theatre in India since 1970s focuses on the various issues and problems faced by women in the society and family. The women playwrights of this time represent in their works issues like domestic violence, bride-burning, exploitation of women's sexuality, molestation and exploitation of girl-child. Among the women playwrights writing in English, Dina Mehta is a pioneer. Her play *Getting Away with Murder* (1989) presents the troubled lives of three friends Mallika, Sonali and Raziya. In this play Mehta shows how the lives of these friends are anguished by violence in multifaceted ways. Patriarchy plays a crucial role in the agonised lives of these characters. Social evil like 'witch killing' is another important subject dealt in this play. In this paper I shall evaluate how violence and abuse affects the lives of the female characters, and how they struggle to achieve their emancipation from their troubled situations.

Keywords: violence, trauma, patriarchy, sexual abuse, emancipation.



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The post-Independence Indian drama is largely concerned with the anxieties of the subjugated and marginalised individuals who struggle to combat hegemonic supremacies of the ruling class. The playwrights of this period have explored contemporary social themes and issues like familial conflict, personal difficulties and complex human relationships in their plays. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, complex gender issues, domestic violence, the predicament of women and sexual abuse of children are probed by many playwrights. Playwrights and directors such as Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Habib Tanvir and Mohan Rakesh have echoed through their plays the uneven sharing of authority and rights between the two genders. A new form of theatre—‘street theatre’ started to gain strength from early 1970s. This form of theatre was radical in approach and it experimented with the contemporary burning social issues of India. A group of Delhi radical theatre amateurs under the leadership of Safdar Hashmi formed Jana Natya Manch also known as ‘Janam’ in 1973 and sought to take theatre to the people. In 1979 ‘Janam’ performed an agitation propaganda street play *Aurat* which addressed problems like dowry harassment and domestic violence.

During the colonial period women were marginalised in the fields of playwriting, theatre production and management. Though this scenario gradually changed in the post-Independence period, most women playwrights still remained absent from the print medium. Tutun Mukherjee edited anthology *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005) is a pioneering book as for the first time in India it brings together eighteen unpublished plays of female playwrights translated to English from ten major Indian regional languages. In the introduction of this anthology, which is entitled as “Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre,” Tutun Mukherjee argues that while postcolonial Indian drama has become “more varied, rich and diverse both in content and semiotics,” it has still largely ignored “women’s experiences” (10). The women’s theatre narratives in India emerged in late 1970s as a reaction to the male dominated theatrical traditions of regional theatre. Indian feminist theatre cannot be considered to be restricted to any specific language or dramatic custom. As it continued to flourish, it brought into focus difficulties and problems of women in Indian society hitherto remain untouched in the writings of their male counterparts. With the growth of female discourses, authentic portrayal of woman occupied important spaces in female-centric plays; these discourses offered a truthful presentation of women’s predicament in the Indian society for the first time.

Tutun Mukherjee’s *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* validates the fact that Indian women playwrights are engaging themselves in the act of looking at social issues from women’s perspective. In “Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre” of this volume, Mukherjee states that “the denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to ‘vulgarise’ and ‘devalue’ oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and public space have all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presences in others” (4). Mukherjee also stresses that “theatre seems to reflect, like other cultural activities, an institutional structure in which artistic and administrative control still remains largely in the hands of men” (4).

The women’s liberation activities in the 1960s and the 1970s helped in reviving the unseen female tradition in the area of theatrical writing. Regarding the emergence of Indian women’s theatre, Anita Singh writes in “Aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre”:



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