



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Class Conflict In Dina Mehta's Brides Are Not For Burning

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### Abstract

*Brides Are Not for Burning* is Dina Mehta's award winning play for which she bagged first prize in an international competition of playwriting sponsored by BBC in 1979 for radio plays. Though the play is considered as a critique of dowry in Indian society, it also throws light on the equally significant issue of class conflict in the Indian social structure. The plot of the play revolves around the sudden death of the young bride, Lakshmi, who is a victim of dowry death. Through this play the hierarchical structure in Indian society is depicted where the upper-class dominates the middle-class which perpetuates moral decay and exploitation. The interaction between economic inequality, social power and gender oppression is also brought forth through this play. The class conflict in this play is depicted through the skirmish between the rich and the poor as well as through the tension caused within the middle class owing to its struggle for upward mobility. The present research paper is an attempt to study how the play depicts the class divisions within our Indian social structure. This research paper argues that the tragedy of the characters in the play is intensified due to the class conflict between them. The play highlights an urgent need for social transformation in this context.

**Keywords :** ( Dina Mehta, Class conflict, patriarchy, economic inequality, gender oppression,)

### Introduction

Dina Mehta's play *Brides Are Not for Burning* can be called as a social play which analyses the ingrained disparities in Indian society such as the socio-economic inequalities and gender inequalities. This play powerfully represents the class conflict in Indian society. At the same time it exposes how interpersonal relationships and institutional structures are formed by these economic hierarchies. Through this play, Dina Mehta has depicted such economic system where the poor people have to sell their labour for earning their living and the rich people become richer on the income obtained from the labour of the poor. She criticizes this type of economic system where the rights of the poor working -class people are not secured by the law.

The plot of the play revolves around the sudden death of the young bride, Lakshmi, who is a victim of dowry death. The dowry victim Laxmi suffers emotional humiliation at the hands of her mother-in-law and sisters-in -law only because she is from a poor family. She is not financially independent as she is not well educated .Hence the members in her in-laws' family get a chance to humiliate her. She is so helpless that she has no other alternative than staying in the in-laws' house and tolerating the humiliation. Finally, she is forced to commit suicide to get rid of the humiliation. Through this play the hierarchical structure in Indian society is depicted where the upper-class

dominates the middle-class which perpetuates moral decay and exploitation.

**Objectives:** 1. The present research paper is an attempt to study how the play depicts the class divisions within the Indian social structure.

2. It also analyses how the class conflict affects the life of the characters in the play.

**Research Methodology:** Analytical and interpretative methodology is used for this research.

**Analysis:** The term ‘class’ is used here to mean a social class. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the term social class as: It is “a group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status”. In the age of industrialization new groups were established in society. The first group was that of the industrial capitalists and the second consisted of the urban working class who worked in the newly established factories. These groups were described on the basis of economic condition. The first group was that of the rich people who were the owners of capital. Contrary to this, the second group was that of the poor people who were dependent on wages. Karl Marx, the thinker and sociologist has called these two groups as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The play emphasizes, through the portrayal of dowry, family pressure, and injustice the way class conflict interconnects with gender harassment and causes violence.

In the play, *Brides Are Not for Burning*, the Desai family represents the middle class while the Marfatia family represents the upper class. The Desais have strong desire for upward mobility but they have their own economic limitations. Lakshmi’s father wants to marry off his daughter in an economically stable family even though it causes him heavy financial stress. Dina Mehta has described how extravagantly Mr. Desai spent money on Laxmi’s wedding in his own words as:

Father: “Marriage is 12 tolas of gold,  
2,000 rupees for a hall, utensils of steel, saris of  
silk... Their expectations were endless....

They thought I had feathered my nest with bribes and kickbacks....

I wanted to do my best by Laxmi! (Mehta, 1993, p.13)

The above dialogue shows the anguish of a poor bride’s father for whom it is very difficult to fulfil the expectations of the groom’s family.

In this play, a social reality is depicted in which marriage is considered as a means of class progression and not a bond between two individuals which is based on mutual reverence and trust. Here begins the central conflict of the play through the wrong assumptions of the bride, Laxmi’s father. The custom of dowry in Indian matrimonial system plays a key role in strengthening these aspirations. It means the transfer of money, gold and other objects from the bride’s family to the groom’s family which is supposed to determine their social status. It further buttresses the class hierarchy in Indian social structure. Lakshmi’s value is determined by the wealth she brings at the time of her marriage and hence, marriage becomes a sort of economic transaction. In this way Laxmi is commoditized.

Lakshmi’s in-laws belong to upper class which is a higher socio-economic condition than that of her parents. Their demands for dowry show their greed for money and their desire to grab wealth. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law torture Lakshmi psychologically and physically. Though Laxmi’s in-laws do not directly make the demand of dowry they torture and humiliate her as the dowry brought by her is not satisfactory as per their wish. Just on the next day of her marriage, Laxmi’s mother-in-law taunts her saying that her father did not fulfill all the promises made by him to the Marfatia family. Lakshmi’s sisters-in-law also pass sarcastic remarks at her by saying that

“a goddess of wealth had entered their home” (Mehta, 1993, p.16) in such clothes which would be suitable for only a servant and her jewels were also not suitable and worthy of her name.

Laxmi’s in-laws and her husband torment her so much that she is reduced to a cook and a servant in the five years of her marriage. Lakshmi’s mother-in-law humiliates her by calling her a cheat as well as ingrate because according to her Lakshmi failed to perform her duty towards her husband and her family as a daughter-in-law and

“set fire to his hopes and his illustrious name and thrown the ashes in his face!”( Mehta,1993,p.70)

Immediately after that Laxmi ran towards the kitchen and locked herself in the kitchen and immolated herself by pouring kerosene. Thus, from the plot of the play it is clear that this is an incident of the humiliation and exploitation of the poor people at the hands of the rich. Laxmi's in-laws' behaviour exemplifies how class privilege permits humiliation of people. It is suggested through the play that economic superiority often renders into moral liberty, which permits the upper class people like the Marfatia to continue injustice without any reason.

In this context S. Devika rightly puts it about the condition of women in Indian society in her research article ‘The Voice of Protest: Burning Issues in Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*’ as:

“The system of dowry relegates woman 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.”

In the play Dina Mehta has shown the class conflict operating in the form of the tussle between the different characters in the plays. Here, Sanjay and Vinod can be called as belonging to the bourgeoisie class because both of them are rich businessmen. Vinod does the business of exporting cloth by which he earns a huge amount while Sanjay owns a factory which produces pesticides. On the other hand, Laxmi's father, Mr. Desai, Suresh, Tarla's husband, Thelma Lobo, Anil, Roy and Kalu can be called as the proletariat or working-class people.

The bourgeoisie characters mentioned above can be called as the oppressors and the proletariats can be called as the oppressed. They are oppressed and humiliated by the bourgeoisie characters directly or indirectly. They have different opinions and outlooks. Therefore, there is conflict between these characters on different issues. This class conflict is found between the characters- Vinod and Anil, and between Malini and Laxmi's Mother-in-law.

**Conflict between Anil and Vinod-** Vinod and Anil confront each other when Laxmi's brother, Anil goes to meet him in his office after knowing about the insurance of Laxmi. Anil wants to confirm whether the insurance was drawn by Vinod in the name of his sister, Laxmi before her death. So Anil enquires about the sum of insurance for Laxmi. He tells Vinod that he is going to reinstitute Laxmi's case in the court. He makes Vinod aware that he will not get a paisa of the insurance policy if in the new investigations it is proved that Laxmi's suicide occurred within a year from the date of issue of the insurance policy. Vinod is afraid but he tells Anil that he does not worry about a small amount of eighty thousand rupees and tells Anil to do the worst he can.

He further insults Anil by saying “you are not even a nail in my saddle”! (Mehta, 1993, p.66)

Vinod humiliates Anil by asking if he has thought about the cost of the new proceedings of court. He means to say that Anil and his family cannot bear the fees of the court proceedings as they are poor. Vinod also abuses Anil calling him bastard, swine, and “shameless dirty crook”. (Mehta, 1993, p.66) He says that Anil has empty pockets and there is nothing in his head but some confusion only. At that time Anil is angry with him and he speaks fiercely:

“That brides are not for burning! Not as a ritual sacrifice on the altar of avarice and greed.” (Mehta, 1993, p.63).

He tells that he is going to prove in the court that it was not accidental but a planned murder. Anil also tells Vinod that he met Dr. Lodha and the doctor told him that Laxmi was taken to the hospital three and a half hours after her death. Though Vinod lies to Anil that the doctor was not available at the exact time, Anil tells all the details about the doctor, his compounder and his wife at that time. He tells Vinod that the doctor was at home at 7pm and he was doing some work and proves that Vinod is telling lies. As a result Vinod is extremely afraid and offers Anil to give 10000 rupees for not reinstating the case and keeping mum. However, Anil is firm on his decision and he leaves the office of Vinod determined to give justice to his innocent sister Laxmi.

**Conflict between Malini and Lakshmi's mother- in- law** -Malini is sure that Lakshmi's death is not an accident but she is murdered by her in-laws because she gets hint from Sanjay that Malini's witness was bought by Vinod indirectly by reinstating Tarla's husband, Suresh in the office of Sanjay who had dismissed him from his work. She comes to know from Tarla, that Lakshmi's mother -in- law prevented the servant Kalu and Lakshmi's brother -in- law Arjun from saving Lakshmi when she was burning. Vinod also pretended to save her only at the last moment. So Malini goes to meet the mother- in- law of Laxmi but she does not accept her guilt and crime but she tells Malini that whatever the verdict is given by the coroner is right and Malini and her brother should not come to her house hoping to get some money. Malini says that it was possible for them to save Laxmi but day did not do anything to save her and instead of that let her die. On this remark of Malini, Lakshmi's mother- in- law says that it is only her destiny that she has died by burning and nobody can change one's destiny. She calls Malini a whore and Malini is so angry with the mother- in- s law that she calls her a 'she devil' and accuses her of the murder of Lakshmi and

says, " you murdered her!" (Mehta, 1993, p.83)

There is a hot debate on the issue of Lakshmi's death between Malini and Laxmi's mother-in-law and Malini tells her that she should not meet her again because if they meet again, she would be tempted to kill her.

From this play it is clear that class conflict and gender oppression are interconnected issues. Lakshmi's helplessness is increased by her situation as being a woman and belonging to a financially weak family. Thus, it is highlighted that patriarchal customs together with economic structures cause the marginalization of women. Lakshmi's suffering is caused due to class dissimilarity. The legal system, which is supposed to give justice, is also manipulated by the rich Marfatia family. Lakshmi's death is proved by law as an accident for the lack of proper evidences. This failure of the legal institution brings forth the systemic nature of the conflict between the upper and middle classes depicted in the play.

## Conclusion

Mehta's play *Brides Are Not for Burning* is a powerful criticism of class conflict in Indian social structure. Through this play it is clear that class conflict is not an isolated issue but it goes hand in hand with patriarchal norms and gender oppression. In the play, the dowry system is depicted by Mehta as a prime site of class tussle and the main cause of increasing economic disparity which causes violence and oppression. The central character, Lakshmi is an example of how a woman can become the victim of class-based exploitation. Through this play, Mehta inspires the audience not to be passive spectators of such type of events but to question such social customs and try to bring change in the society.

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BY [IO NEWS WRITER](#) MARCH 25, 2025

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