

# Language, Ideology, and Social Power in Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning*: A Critical Discourse Perspective

RAJAN<sup>1</sup>, DR. NIZAMUDDIN<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1,2</sup> English, RIMT University

**Abstract-** *Dina Mehta's Brides Are Not for Burning (1979) stands as a searing indictment of dowry-related violence and the patriarchal structures that sustain it in Indian society. This paper examines the play through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, exploring how language functions simultaneously as an instrument of ideological control and a site of resistance. The analysis reveals how Mehta's linguistic choices—in dialogue, characterization, and dramatic structure—expose the power dynamics that reduce women to commodities while simultaneously carving out spaces for critique and subversion. The play demonstrates that language is never neutral; it carries within it the weight of social hierarchies, gendered expectations, and the quiet violence of everyday speech. Through its unflinching portrayal of dowry-related deaths and the complicity of families in perpetuating such violence, Brides Are Not for Burning continues to resonate as a vital work of feminist theatre that challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the relationship between language, ideology, and social power.*

**Keywords-** *Critical Discourse Analysis, Dina Mehta, Dowry Deaths, Patriarchy, Feminist Theatre, Language and Power*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1979, when Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* won first prize in a worldwide playwriting competition sponsored by the British Broadcasting Corporation, it brought into sharp focus a reality that Indian society had long preferred to keep in the shadows. The play's title itself is a declaration—a refusal to accept the normalization of bride burning, a phenomenon that had begun attracting public attention in India during the 1970s. What makes Mehta's work particularly remarkable is not merely its subject matter but the way it uses language to

expose the ideological underpinnings of a system that treats women as disposable commodities.

The practice of dowry—the transfer of property from a bride's family to that of the groom—has deep roots in Indian tradition, with scriptural references to *streedhan* in Hindu mythology. Yet what began as a customary practice evolved into a system of extortion and violence, one in which brides who failed to meet their in-laws' demands could face harassment, torture, and ultimately death. The play investigates the issue of women's subjugation and makes an integral part of the canon of Indian feminist and reformist theatre. Mehta interrogates the underlying root causes of this subjugation institutionalized through stereotypes of gender performance and sexuality. The campaign against dowry murders in Delhi in 1979 marked the first time dowry deaths, hitherto regarded as suicide, were dubbed as "murder". Mehta's play participates in this crucial redefinition.

This paper approaches *Brides Are Not for Burning* from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, a theoretical framework that views language as a form of social practice inextricably linked to power relations and ideological formations. The analysis examines how Mehta's play operates at three interconnected levels: as a linguistic text with specific lexical and grammatical choices; as a discursive practice that draws on and challenges prevailing discourses about gender and marriage; and as a social practice that intervenes in the broader struggle for women's rights in India

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged from the recognition that language is never innocent. Unlike traditional linguistic analysis, which tends to treat language as a neutral system of communication, CDA insists that discourse is always embedded in social relations of power. Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides a useful framework: the descriptive level examines the formal properties of the text itself; the interpretive level considers how the text is produced and consumed within particular discursive practices; and the explanatory level situates the text within broader social and ideological structures.

This framework is particularly well-suited to the study of drama, where language is not merely a vehicle for plot and character but the very substance of the theatrical experience. The dialogues that characters speak, the silences they maintain, the ways they address one another—all of these carry ideological weight.

Three key concepts from CDA are especially relevant. *Ideology* refers to the systems of belief and value embedded in language that serve to maintain existing power relations. *Hegemony* describes the process by which dominant groups secure consent rather than imposing their will through force—a process that operates significantly through discourse. *Naturalization* refers to the way particular ideologies come to seem inevitable or common-sense, so that alternatives become difficult even to imagine. Mehta's play works tirelessly to denaturalize the ideologies that sustain dowry-related violence.

## III. LANGUAGE AS A SITE OF IDEOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION

One of the most striking features of *Brides Are Not for Burning* is the way Mehta uses language to expose the ideological assumptions that underlie everyday speech about marriage and women. The play does not need to lecture its audience about the evils of dowry; instead, it allows the characters' own

words to reveal the casual brutality of a system that has become naturalized.

In the world of the play, a daughter is not a person but a burden—a financial liability that must be disposed of through marriage. This emerges through countless small linguistic choices. The language of commerce permeates discussions of marriage: daughters are "given away," grooms are "settled," and families speak of "managing" weddings as though they were business transactions. This economic discourse is so pervasive that it has become invisible, a mere description of how things are rather than an ideological construction of how things should be.

The title of the play itself performs a crucial denaturalizing function. "Brides Are Not for Burning" is a direct challenge to the linguistic framing that had become common in discussions of dowry deaths. When a young woman died in suspicious circumstances, the preferred term was often "kitchen accident" or "suicide"—language that obscured the violence and shifted blame onto the victim. By insisting that brides are *not* for burning, Mehta refuses this euphemistic evasion.

Mehta's dialogue similarly exposes the gap between the official language of family values and the reality of domestic violence. Characters speak of "honor," "tradition," and "family reputation" while systematically destroying the lives of the women in their care. This is not hypocrisy in the simple sense of saying one thing and doing another; it is the operation of ideology, which allows people to genuinely believe in their own virtue while participating in systems of oppression. The language of tradition serves to legitimize violence, making it appear not as a choice but as an inevitability.

## IV. POWER DYNAMICS IN DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

If language is a vehicle for ideology, it is also a medium through which power is exercised. In *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Mehta meticulously constructs dialogues that reveal the power imbalances between men and women, between in-laws and brides, between those who speak and those who are silenced.

The play's male characters embody a masculinity defined through control and domination. Their speech patterns reflect this: they give orders, make pronouncements, and expect obedience. When women speak, it is often in response—apologizing, explaining, pleading. The linguistic asymmetry is not accidental; it is the verbal manifestation of a social order in which men hold power and women are expected to submit.

Yet Mehta is too subtle a playwright to present this as a simple binary of oppressor and victim. Her female characters are not merely passive recipients of patriarchal violence; they are agents who use language in complex ways, sometimes colluding with the system and sometimes resisting it. The character of Lakmi is subjected to persecution by both her parents and her in-laws, yet she struggles to articulate her suffering within a linguistic framework that offers her no vocabulary for protest. Her tragedy is not only that she is abused but that she lacks the language to name her abuse, to demand that it stop.

This is one of the play's most devastating insights: oppression operates not only through what is said but through what cannot be said. The silences in the play—the things that characters cannot bring themselves to utter, the conversations that never happen—are as significant as the dialogues that do occur. When a bride is unable to tell her parents about the violence she is experiencing, when a mother cannot protect her daughter because to do so would violate the codes of marital harmony, these silences speak volumes about the power structures that constrain speech itself.

#### V. RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSION THROUGH LANGUAGE

For all its bleakness, *Brides Are Not for Burning* is not a play without hope. Mehta's drama is itself an act of resistance—a refusal to accept the normalization of violence against women. And within the play, there are moments when characters find ways to use language subversively, to challenge the ideologies that would otherwise crush them.

The very act of telling the story is a form of resistance. By bringing dowry deaths into the realm of public discourse, Mehta challenges the silence that has allowed such violence to continue. The play insists that these deaths are not private tragedies but public crimes, not accidents but murders. This reframing is itself a political act.

Within the dramatic action, moments of linguistic resistance are often small but significant. A character might refuse a command, speak out of turn, or use language in a way that challenges expected roles. Malini, unlike her passive sister Lakmi, is a rebel who challenges the discriminatory system, the judiciary biased in favour of the rich, and the corruption rampant in all fields. She questions double standards and refuses dual morality. These moments are not always successful—the play does not offer easy victories—but they demonstrate that the ideological system is not monolithic, that there are cracks through which alternative ways of speaking and being can emerge.

The play's engagement with postcolonial feminism is also significant. Mehta is writing not only against patriarchy but against a particular form of patriarchy entangled with colonialism, nationalism, and the construction of Indian identity. The language of tradition used to justify violence against women is also the language of cultural authenticity, of resistance to Western influence. Mehta's play exposes the way this discourse can be used to shield oppressive practices from criticism, framing any challenge as an attack on Indian culture itself.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* remains a powerful work of feminist theatre more than four decades after its initial broadcast. Its enduring relevance speaks to the persistence of the issues it addresses: dowry-related violence continues to claim lives in India, and the ideological structures that enable such violence remain largely intact.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, the play's significance lies in its unflinching examination of how language operates in the service

of oppression. Mehta shows us that the violence against brides is not merely physical but also discursive—it is enacted through the words that are spoken and, just as importantly, through the words that remain unspoken. The language of tradition, honor, and family values serves to legitimize what would otherwise be recognized as murder. The economic discourse that frames daughters as burdens and marriages as transactions dehumanizes women before any physical violence begins.

Yet the play also demonstrates that language can be a site of resistance. By refusing the euphemisms that obscure violence, by giving voice to the suffering of women, by challenging the ideological assumptions embedded in everyday speech, Mehta's drama performs the critical work that CDA theorizes: it reveals the power relations hidden in language and opens space for alternative ways of speaking and being.

In the end, *Brides Are Not for Burning* asks us to consider what it would mean to take its title seriously—not just as a statement about dowry deaths but as a challenge to all the ways in which language is used to dehumanize, to normalize violence, and to maintain unjust power relations. Brides are not for burning. And perhaps, by extension, no human being is for burning, for silencing, for reducing to a commodity. This is the radical humanism at the heart of Mehta's play, and it is a message that remains as urgent today as when the play first aired.

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