

**BODY AND MEMORY IN
DEIRDRE KINAHAN'S
RATHMINES ROAD AND DINA
MEHTA'S GETTING AWAY WITH
MURDER**

(From a section of the third chapter from ongoing IRC funded research project '*Representing Sexual Violence on Contemporary Irish and Indian Stage*')

Author Bio: Neha Kamrani an IRC funded international doctoral researcher based in UCD. She is also a Research Fellow for Media Action Against Rape (MAAR), a UNESCO funded project to study rape reportage in India.



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



Neha Kamrani

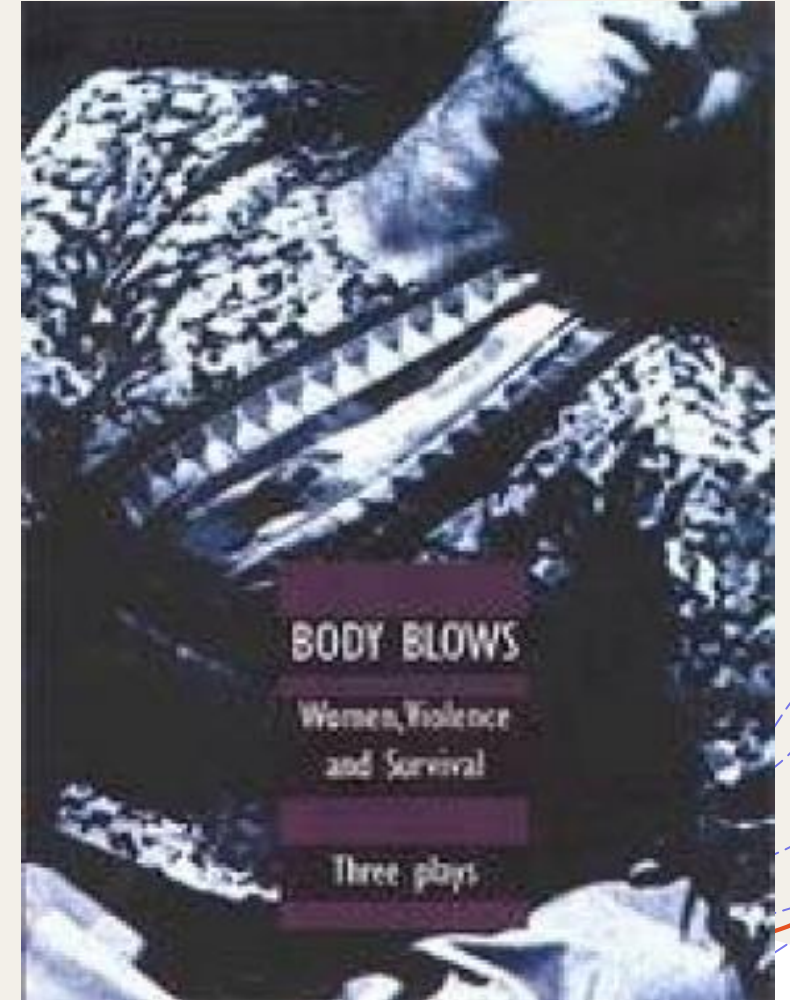
RATHMINES ROAD

- Deirdre Kinahan's play *Rathmines Road* is about Sandra who has returned to Wicklow, Ireland after nearly 25 years with her husband Ray to sell off her inherited property in Ireland.
- As with most homecomings, she meets her long-forgotten friends and deals with the familiar but altered surroundings.
- Sandra is visited by a school friend David, now transitioned to Dairne, and a former acquaintance Linda.
- Linda is also a realtor who will help Sandra in selling her house and she visits Sandra with her husband Eddie. Sandra immediately identifies Eddie as one of her rapists and imagines how to confront him about the rape. In two acts, she imagines the hardships that she and her family may face if she disclosed her rape and the rapist.



GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

- First performed in 1990, Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* has generated a lot of critical interest in India over the decades for the subjects that it portrays through the lives of three friends Sonali, Mallika (Malu) and Raziya.
- In its two acts, the play encompasses a wide range of women's issues in India such as sexual harassment, female infanticide, gender-based workplace harassment, child sexual abuse, witch hunting, infertility, infidelity, and the Muslim Marriages Act 1939.
- The overarching action is based on Sonali's decision to abort her child because she fears it is a girl. As the morality behind such a decision is questioned by Sonali's friends, it is revealed that Sonali is a survivor of child sexual abuse and was sexually abused by her uncle from the age of eight to twelve. As the play progresses, Gopal's (Sonali's brother) complicity with the uncle's murder is revealed as is the source of Sonali's hallucinations. The play ends with Sonali having decided against the abortion but most of the issues in other women's lives remain unresolved.



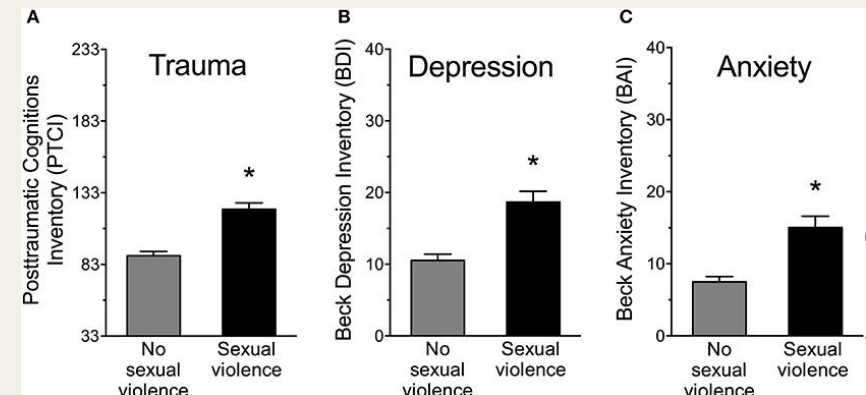
DIFFERING INSTANCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- + While *Getting Away* is an account of a child survivor of sexual abuse and her inability to articulate or remember the abuse, *Rathmines Road* is a narrative of a teen gang-rape survivor who grapples with her memory and is afraid to complicate her life by disclosing the sexual violence she had suffered.
- + In *Rathmines Road*, the challenges faced by Sandra are more outward than inward as she faces hostile friends and family but in Sonali's case, the challenges are more psychological. Despite these clear differences, the two plays clearly highlight the different ways in which post-traumatic stress affects the survivors of sexual violence (child or teen) and the complicated nature of retrospective disclosures in contemporary Indian and Irish society.



PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

+ Simon McCarthy-Jones in *Violence Against Women 2019* notes that long term effects of non-consensual experiences of sexual intercourse in women have been severely understudied, arguing that women who had experienced forced or 'persuaded' sex at a young age were more susceptible to worse physical and psychological health.



PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF PTSD IN *GETTING AWAY*

- + Sonali complains of a recurrent headache, insists on smoking while pregnant and hysterically claims that she can hear her dead mother's voice and see her in her bedroom mirror.
- + The audience initially reads Sonali's absurd claims as her way of expressing the anxiety of being pregnant, possibly with an unwanted girl child but the reasons are more convoluted. As the play progresses, we witness Sonali's psychosis as she tries to make associations and sense of what had happened to her through her repressed memories.
- + The hints of sexual abuse Sonali suffered as a child resurface as she associates her mother-in-law's prying with her uncle's abusive behaviour. She shouts at the end of scene three: "You have no other work, old woman, but to peep at me- like him! Every time I took a bath I could hear him outside... breathing... waiting to look at me without my clothes on... *(screaming)*." (Mehta 66)

PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF PTSD IN *RATHMINES ROAD*

- + In *Rathmines Road* too, we see Sandra crying and shouting affirmations in the first scene. As the scene progresses, Sandra suffers from breathlessness, fear and confusion. She has a panic attack in the first scene, and it is suggested that this is not the first time.
- + Despite exhibiting most symptoms of PTSD so far, the audience and her friends still read these physical manifestations of PTSD as Sandra's confusion at having to sell her house, a dear possession that has been in her family for generations; until she utters, "Fuck you Eddie Dunne" (10) and suddenly muffles her mouth to stop herself from speaking up. From this utterance on, the motivations and reasons behind Sandra's behaviour become clearer for the audiences but for Sandra, her world of hallucinations and imagined scenarios takes over.

AUDITORY VERBAL HALLUCINATIONS IN *GETTING AWAY AND RATHMINES ROAD*

+ Simon Mc-Carthy Jones also notes that there is enough medical evidence to support that suffering child or teen abuse is associated with an increased probability of developing the experience of ‘hearing voices’, formally termed auditory verbal hallucinations (AVH) and that “post traumatic symptomatology and compulsions predicted lifetime experience of AVH.” (McCarthy-Jones 319) The findings of the study included that:

+ Post-traumatic symptomatology is a mediator of the CSA–AVH relation. Although no evidence was found for obsessional thoughts as a mediating variable, a potential mediating role for compulsions is theoretically intriguing. This study’s findings reiterate the need to ask about experiences of childhood adversity and post-traumatic symptomology in people with AVH, as well as the likely therapeutic importance of trauma-informed and trauma-based interventions. (S. McCarthy-Jones, 2018, 318)

NARRATIVIZING RAPE ON STAGE

- + Lisa Fitzpatrick argues that the idea of narrating the rape in the survivor's voice and not exhibiting it on stage ensures that "the audience are never allowed unmediated access to it, and their awareness of the woman's subjective response is maintained." (Fitzpatrick 93) In highlighting this style of representation, Fitzpatrick argues that consensual sex and rape may look alike on stage and "consent or lack of consent is not necessarily visually or mimetically representable. (25)



NARRATIVIZING RAPE: *RATHMINES ROAD*



Rathmines Road: Spotlights on Sandra

NARRATIVIZING RAPE: GETTING AWAY

"GOPAL (*they now move in unison, one behind the other, miming the incident that took place years ago*): I climb up after you, slowly... and screen you as you place it on the topmost step. The scene of the 'accident'... our bare feet on shattered bits of the cart. Uncle had slipped on the topmost step and fallen down the staircase, landing on his head." (Mehta 89)

"GOPAL: Night after night...coming to her bed, the pious swine with sandalwood paste on his forehead and holy beads round his neck". (Mehta 88)

SILENCE AND BARRIERS TO ADULT DISCLOSURES

- + In the attempt to retheorize rape and study silence as 'a language like any other' Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne describe Ernestine Schlant's stance that "silence is not a semantic void". "Silence can be oppressive and yet as Schlant emphasizes, 'like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions'" (Schlant as quoted in Thompson page) The silence can be read either as a choice, a necessity or a refusal to face repercussions of disclosure.
- + In the context of *Rathmines Road* and *Getting Away*, instead of reading this silence as another tool for victim blaming, it can be read as a reflection on either a survivor's choice or their hesitation to face legal and emotional trauma that follows disclosures.

BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

From a study based on Ramona Alaggia's *An Ecological Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure: Considerations for Child and Adolescent Mental Health*:

- + **Barriers from Within:** Included in this category are participants' inner turmoil and emotional responses to the abuse that prevented them from telling. Three subthemes were identified: internalized victim-blaming, mechanisms to protect oneself, and immature development at time of abuse.
- + **Barriers in Relation to Others** are the intermediate-level barriers to disclosure that are linked directly to the participant's family members, caregivers, peers, or a significant adult presence in their life such as a teacher or school personnel. Four subthemes were identified: violence and dysfunction in the family, power dynamics, an awareness of the impact of telling, and a fragile social network.
- + **Barriers in Relation to the Social World** acknowledge the context in which the abuse occurred. Four subthemes were identified: labelling, taboo of sexuality, lack of services available, and culture or time period.
(Milne, Palmerb and Collin-Vézinaa 6-8)

CONCLUSION

+ *Rathmines Road* and *Getting Away*, in their plots and future course of action for their protagonists, discuss only the barriers to adult disclosure of sexual abuse whereas there is no mention of legal process to initiate justice. This is so because in both the plays, legal trial is not even shown as an option because reporting retrospective abuse itself remains a challenge enough for the survivors in India and Ireland.