

Dowry and its presence in English Literature: A critical study

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore that dowry is a social problem all over the world and dowry is not a gift. Marriage is the name of settlement or we can say women's settlement. Dowry became the worst part of it. The practice of dowry or 'Joutuk', demands made by the groom's side to the bride's side, have in the last few decades become a widespread traditional patriarchal assumptions. Now this evil practice converted to a new tradition in the name of gift. This paper analyzes the present situation of dowry, differences between dowry and gift and also presence of dowry in English literature.

Key Words: Dowry, Dower, Medieval, Literature, Marriage.

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1. Introduction:

Women are the most important part of the society. Ignoring half of the people, no society can develop. But always women have to prove their worth and importance because of the tradition and culture practiced by the society. Dowry is a well-known problem for women in almost all over the world. Dowry is a gift of money or valuables given by the bride's family to the groom's at the time of their marriage (which continues till the bride's death actually).

Though in the beginning the word 'Dowry' was not used in the marriages, gifts were exchanged as a symbol of love, prestige. But now Dowry has become gifts which is mandatory for bride's family. No one talk about it directly but people from both sides knows that the bride's family is sending gifts.

Dowry system did not start as an impediment to a daughter's marriage in ancient time. But in the medieval time the bride's family was forced to give dowry because of the bride-groom's family expectation. Interesting part is that the groom's family will never accept that any kind of gifts from the bride's family is part of dowry. They will say that, "We didn't want anything, they gave it to their daughter."

Often the parents of the daughter are willing to provide large sum of money and expensive goods to make the future of their daughter a pleasant and secured one. In solvent families the family of the grooms expects that the parents of the bride will willingly send the expensive gifts to the new couple, which they can show of as a symbol of prestige and wealth. In all cases the lives of the young brides are at stake. They have to live in a hostile environment where they become the victims of physical, social, mental and psychological torture.

In the development of the entire world, there is a conception in human's mind for a very long time that man is a hero, a magnificent object to be admired. Women only have to depend on men. So men will never admit women intellectual superiority, or even their equality and their possession of a normal human equipment of thought. This conception is also present in literature.

Dowry in general sense is meant to signify the monetary value of anything which is transacted at the time of or afterwards of marriage between the bride-groom and bride's family as a demand. But in the strict sense the payment given by the groom to the bride is not regarded as the dowry; it is called dower or Mahr. The payment given by the bride to the groom as his demand is called dowry. In our Bangladesh context, the definition is clearly given in Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980; section 4 of which states as follows:

"Dowry means any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly, at the time of marriage or at any time before or after the marriage as consideration for the marriage of the said parties,

but does not include dower or mahr in the case of parsons to whom the Muslim personal law applies.”(www.assignmentpoint.com, 26th August, 2017)

There is the definition of dowry in Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain, 2000 that extended the scope of dowry in the following words, “Dowry means money, goods or any property which has been given or agreed to give to the bride-groom or his family on his behalf, directly or indirectly, at the time of marriage or at any time in condition with the smooth continuation of marital life. (www.assignmentpoint.com, 26th August, 2017)

In Oxford dictionary the definition of Dower is not found. It only defines the term dowry as property or money brought by a bride to her husband. (Oxford Dictionary, 2nd Ed. Oxford University Press, 2000)

The purpose of this research is to describe that dowry is dowry, it cannot be gifts. All the expensive things given by the bride’s family to the groom’s is also part of dowry. (Experience from books, articles, internet and various journals)

This research will help the people who are interested in literature and concerned about life and sufferings of women.

2. Objective/ Research question:

The objectives of this study is to discuss the reality of dowry system. Through this research I intend to explore the following questions:

- What is the present situation of dowry?
- What are the differences between dowry and gift?
- What are the basic causes of dowry?
- How women suffers because of dowry?
- The presence of dowry in English literature.

And many such questions would come into consideration while doing this research.

3. Research methodology:

Like most of the researches on Humanities, this will also be written within the hermeneutical approach. It is a qualitative research. The methodology of the whole work is based on secondary data. The study was conducted using secondary data and literature survey. These data has been collected from various research books on dowry and also some novels by English writers. For preparing this research, I have also used books, novels, and articles on websites, journals and internet.

4. Literature review:

It is a fact that so far no significant research has been done on the reality of dowry, how it converted into gift and its presence in English Literature, except some partial references to this issue in some articles and essays in sporadic manner. There is a limitation of availability of source, data and documents. Most of the authorities of this study were not liberated. As a result, they did not feel the necessity and importance of this study. As we all know dowry is a problem but when it is considered as a gift this problem is automatically solved.

Some books I have used throughout my research. B. Agarwal in his book “Women and property: reducing domestic violence” described about women’s rights, how much property they can own and what is the rights of men in women’s property very clearly, which helped me to understand the issue properly. S. Anderson also described many important aspects of dowry in his journal “Why Dowry Payments Declined with Modernization in Europe but Are Rising in India”

From literature I have read Jane Austen’s novel “Pride and Prejudice” and “Sense and Sensibility”. Both the novels helped me to understand the presence of dowry or money for marriage in literature. I carefully studied the main texts of these two novels. I have also read the essay “The Dowry” by Guy De Maupassant, where dowry came directly as the theme of the essay.

Apart from the above mentioned works, I have found many other critical discussions on women rights and dowry in various journals, magazines of English dailies and articles. All of them are not mentioned here, partly because of the unavailability of the sources at the moment and also because of the fact that so much detailing may pose a burden on the discussion.

5. Dowry in Present Time:

Today marriage has become an occasion to demand and chance to accumulate. Boys are shamelessly and openly sold in the marriage market. The rate of dowry varies family to family, mostly depends upon the groom's accomplishments, family status and other attainments such as education, employment or wealth.

In this ugly market of marriage, a cut throat completion goes on and dump girls are being freely traded as cattle. Today the greedy men marry the refrigerators, video sets, scooter, furniture, car etc. The dowry tradition have become direct and open.

Today every bit of consumer goods can be turned into dowry whether it is TV set, Radio, Watches and even Furniture. But they will accept that what they are taking is Dowry. They will consider it as gift from the bride's family. Today marriage has become a stepping stone to acquire more wealth and social status. Even girls are interested to take all these expensive things with her to show how much money her father spend in her marriage. How much literate a girl is the dowry will not reduce. The family of the brides have to arrange all these expensive gifts to make the girl happy. Many people give and take dowry only because their parents and ancestors had been practicing it. There is no other social institution which has been commercialized as marriage.

6. Difference between Dowry and Gift:

Dowry is not gift. In present time it is converted to gift by some people because we all know dowry is not good. Everyone wants to take it but no one wants to confess that everything they are taking during marriage is dowry.

A gift or a present is an item given to someone without the expectation of payment or return. An item is not a gift, if that item, itself, is already owned by the one to whom it is given. Although gift-giving might involve an expectation of reciprocity, a gift is meant to be free. In many countries, the act of mutually exchanging money, goods, etc. may sustain social relations and contribute to social cohesion. Economists have elaborated the economics of gift-giving into the notion of a gift economy. By extension the term *gift* can refer to anything that makes the other happier or less sad, especially as a favor, including forgiveness and kindness. Gifts are also first and foremost presented on occasions - birthdays and, in Western cultures, Christmas being the main examples and other occasions like birthdays. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gift>, 30th August, 2017). Gift is not mandatory. In rich and royal families gifts used to be given to son-in-laws at the time of marriage. Bride's family can give some gifts like dresses to the groom's but expensive things like the furniture, property is not gift.

The parents of the groom will give the best education to their son in order to get good Bride. But while getting marriage settlement they will ask dowry because "parents who spend a sizable part of their earning in educating their sons regard them as investments to yield returns. Interesting part is that they always disagree to confess that they are taking dowry because they think its gift. Dowry taking is bad or problem but gift is not problem for anyone. Everyone likes to receive gift.

Every parent desires his daughter to be married into a high and rich family to keep up or to add to his prestige. So they try to send as much as they can arrange. In the society it is customary that the parents will arrange their daughter's marriage first and then to their son's. But in some families parents wait for the marriage of their son because of dowry. Dowry or so called gifts brought by the son will help the parents to utilize a part of them in their daughter's marriage.

It is an interesting thing to share that some parents don't want to buy furniture for their son's room because after marriage these things will automatically come as the gifts from bride's house. A few people give more gifts just to exhibit their high social and economic status. Both sides and we can say all knows that gifts are the name of dowry but they think if it is called gift then the meaning of dowry will change.

7. Basic Causes of Dowry:

There are some common causes of dowry. Poverty is the main because people often take dowry to reduce their poverty. Illiteracy, narrow mentality, negative attitude, lack of women education these all are the common causes of dowry. But in the present time these are not the enough causes of dowry. In the city life people are not poor, women are getting education but dowry is present because they converted it. Now the main cause of dowry is social status and security.

Dowry is the bride's gift of love to ensure that she is provided with financial support when she leaves her parents' house. Parents of the girls want to secure her position by sending gifts with her. Sometimes it is the desire of the girl's parents that she should leave happily with her husband and in laws. The aim of the bride's family is that their daughter should not lead a bad or unhappy life. Dowry is also given on parental feelings, concern or sense of obligation, so as not to send their daughter with empty hand. Some parents give dowry from girl's share in their father's property. Women are not independent. They cannot make any decision for their own. Because of that the position of women in a family is much disagreed.

Greediness of the parents of the groom is also a reason for dowry. They think that by giving birth to a boy they have done a spiritual thing. In some families when they arrange marriage for their son they will demand to make easy money because if the bride's family is unable to give that money they will leave the bride and try to get another girl who will bring more.

8. Presence of Money for Marriage in English Literature:

In literature romantic period is the turning point. Some gifted women of the 19th century made such contribution to the development of the English novel and Jane Austen is one them. On her period life of women was almost same to present. Money is everything. Marriage was an important social concern in Jane Austen's time she was fully aware of the disadvantages of remaining single. In the novels of Jane Austen, she dramatized the economic inequality of women, showing how women had to marry undesirable mates in order to gain some financial security. In this period women were placed in a sphere of domestic antiquity. They were raised by their mothers to provide pleasure and enjoyment to their future husband.

Austen's novels raise and explore a variety of issues relating to money and property. Women have no power to inherit their father's property and also they have to wait for a well fortune holder man. Society status is more important than everything. In *Sense and Sensibility* Mr. Willoughby marries another woman for money what Marianne doesn't have. Marriage and money dominate the lives of the women in *Sense and Sensibility*. Those who have money can have good husband. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for Marianne and Elinor, marriage is not a choice, but a necessity, and their need to marry and well is a pressing concern in the novel. In Austen's time, it was almost impossible for women to achieve financial prosperity on their own. As a result they were obliged to marry. In *Sense and Sensibility* a woman's eligibility is defined in terms of her fortune. Lucy Steele realizes that, because she has no fortune Mrs. Ferrars would never approve of a match between her and Edward. All the marriage is for money.

In *Pride and Prejudice* again Jane Austen shows that two sisters Jane and Elizabeth want to make their life perfect but money became the major problem. Worldly marriage is the theme of Austen's unfinished novel. *The Watsons*, which portrays a female economy in which the odds for marriage heavily favor those young women whose fathers can and will pay a dowry. "Physical attractiveness and 'accomplishments' are helpful but insufficient in the absence of adequate funds for a marriage settlement". Mr. Watson dies, the family does not have sufficient money for the dowries or support of the four daughters. As historian Oliver Macdonagh writes, "Matrimony was their only hope to escape from current penury and future ruin or near-ruin. Dowerless, they were pursuing it with varying degrees of ruthlessness." (Patrick Tran, <http://chsaplitprideandprejudice.weebly.com/feminism.html>) 27th August, 2017.

"The Dowry" is another fiction where dowry came directly as a theme, written by Guy De Maupassant. In the Dowry, the writer raised the story related to money and marriage. Maitre Simon was married Mademoiselle Jeanne because he wants the dowry to pay for the practice of Maitre Papillon. Then, the purpose of that marriage is stated clearly that this marriage is not for settlement. Maitre Simon is useless husband because he dared to leave her wife and go with the dowry.

In literature dowry came many times in various forms, which proves that dowry is always present in the society. Literature is the reflection of any society picture. Through literature people can understand the real picture of any society.

10. Conclusion:

Dowry is not a good practice for any society. Dowry system impoverishes those who pay dowry and degrades those who receive it. It lowers the status of women. Because of dowry women are badly treated in their in law house. Sometimes they are killed, injured, abused and so on. We should stop the custom for our future success.

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