

Dowry is an Extreme Disease: A Critical Reading of Tagore's *Dena Paona* and *Aparichita*

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Abstract:

Tagore has been considered one of the pioneers of the genre of short story. His short stories particularly become important because of the depiction of varied hues of society and human experiences. Women's experiences in the patriarchal set-up, in general, are dealt with utmost precision. On one hand, he depicts social adversities related to women's experiences; on the other hand, he is a reformer who tries to weave stories in order to bring about social change. This paper would focus on one such aspect of 'dowry' through select short stories, *Aparichita* and *Dena Paona*. Dowry as social adversity has been well entrenched in South Asian societies since times immemorial. India in the post-independence era has made vigorous attempts in prohibiting this practice through laws, policies and Acts. However, numerous reports of domestic violence and both physical and mental abuse continue to form headlines in daily newspapers. In this light, the present paper attempts to look at Tagore's projection of this vice. This paper aims to investigate the conundrum of dowry in the mentioned short stories wherein the women's experiences of the menace called dowry remain the central foci.

Keywords: dowry, patriarchy, women's experiences, abuse, new woman

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore was not only a literary giant but also a social reformist and visionary. He is regarded as one of the most prolific writers of his time and continues to be a cherished author. He has contributed to various forms of literature like novels, plays, poetry, and short stories, along with essays and memoirs. He was also an artist, lyricist, musician, actor and would also doodle as he edited his poems. Tagore was of the view that a wholesome education meant, educating the minds along with the senses. He was brought up in a family, where an emphasis was laid on the liberation of the mind, freedom of language, spirit, soul and imagination. This enabled him to understand the main purpose of education. He understood that freedom from confinements was a prerequisite for a society to progress. Many of Tagore's themes dealt with nature, love, psychological relationships and most importantly social issues concerning women. Tagore was immensely concerned with the treatment of women in society. In a time when women were largely confined to domestic spaces, none cared for their opinions, Tagore sought to determine the conditions of women as child brides, wives and mothers in his writings. He pictured some of his female characters unconventionally

with a convincing style, by consciously drifting away from the age-old customs, traditions and conventions. Being an enigmatic romantic poet and sensible man, he very well understood the emotions of women: in their hope and despair, joy and sorrow, their yearnings, wishes and dreams. The psychological and physical violence against women in society was pervasive and was cutting across the boundaries of caste and class, as well as urban and rural divisions. The worst thing in the society was that it lacked awareness and even the women seemed to have taken ostracism as their destiny and thus became hostile. Tagore not only spoke of but also felt the need for women to be seen and heard beyond the periphery of the home. He felt that women should and will stand against all odds. Their self-sacrifice and gentleness, their forbearance and their urge to survive the worst of possible conditions of oppression nerved him. All this troubled his sensitive mind, to see such a colossal waste of human treasure. He consciously and critically assessed the position of women in society through his stories and novels. His stories could be seen as a mirror in which men can see themselves and have the conviction to change their perception of women, and women can seek inspiration to bring about a holistic change in society.

The Issue of Dowry in the Indian Subcontinent:

In modern times, women did achieve many milestones. From creating a world for themselves with aspirations and goals, and suffrage movements, to working towards non-exploitative work, equality in education and other opportunities, better healthcare conditions, and reformed social structures. However, discrimination against women has always been a challenge for various policymakers, governments and nongovernmental organisations to address. In India, feminism and women's movements have gathered huge momentum. From the advocacy of equal political and social rights to inheritance and economic rights, we have witnessed women's issues coming to the foreground. One such patriarchal attribute, 'dowry' is the central focus of discussion of this paper. Gandhi once exclaimed, "*Any young man, who makes dowry a condition to marriage, discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.*" (Gandhi) Though there is a Dowry Provision Act of 1961, we have innumerable examples from a varied range of newspapers popping in front of us now and then. This social practice has managed to sustain itself even after various Acts, certainly leaving women susceptible to various forms of domestic violence and physical abuse. Though literate societies are expected to stand against this menace nevertheless, it has a different trend altogether. In urban areas, dowry has been masked with the term „gift“ which the parents ignorantly provide the groom to give in a sense of comfort and the bride a sense of security! Strikingly enough, the practice, though illegal, is still part of various societies in modern-day India. Indian National Crime Record Bureau shows a whopping number of dowry death cases under the violence against women section. The Indian Dowry Prohibition Legislation of 1961 focuses on the punishment of people engaging in giving or taking dowry under the Indian Penal Code. Further, the practice of dowry aggravates violence against women. Most of the cases, it is planned by the husband and his family to either physically or mentally abuse the woman, wherein the woman either succumbs to the torture or commits suicide. Ram Ahuja in his book *Social Problems in India* also discusses the problem of dowry deaths. He points out that killers in bride burning cases are not even arrested let alone sentenced. He further states from his empirical study that, "*The most important sociological factor in the causation of dowry death is the offender's environmental stress or social tensions caused by factors endogenous and exogenous to his (husband) family, and the important psychological factor is the killer's authoritarian personality, dominant nature, and his personality maladjustment.*" (Ahuja, 249)

The stark reality of humiliation and dowry death: Rabindranath Tagore's *Dena Paona*

Dowry death is one of the primary themes of the short story *Dena Paona*. Though the groom is not directly related to the tensions the female protagonist, Nirupama undergoes, the family certainly played an essential role in causing the inevitable end she succumbs to, as Ahuja points out in his book. The story revolves around Nirupama who faces mental abuse at the hands of her in-laws as her father is unable to pay the exact amount to be paid in dowry. The humiliation faced repetitively by Nirupama's father, Ramshundar Mitra reflects the stark reality of things which still happens in today's times. The story opens with marriage proposals coming for Nirupama and Ramshundar fixing her marriage to the son of Ray Bahadur. Though their aristocratic glory and ancestral property were deteriorating, however, his demeanour did not. Ray Bahadur demanded ten thousand rupees and gifts, to which Ramshundar yielded. Ramshundar could not gather the amount even after borrowing from his acquaintances initially but got a money lender who promised to give him the money on the day of marriage. The money lender did not turn up and Ray Bahadur was infuriated and insulted Ramshundar who was already on his knees and requested them to not leave the solemn place like this and that he would pay the amount. However, the groom sternly stood against this bargaining and declared that he came to marry and will leave without doing so. The groom, because of his education, opposes this situation and marries her, disobeying his father, Ray Bahadur. This marriage scene is significant to understand the characters and the then-patriarchal society. The bride's father is humiliated to the core by the groom's father. Ray Bahadur is talking as if he has an undeclared power that he possesses from both an economic and a social perspective.

As days go by, unparalleled verbal abuse goes on Nirupama as her father could not pay the amount. Every time Ramshundar paid a visit to her daughter he understands the intense situation she has been dwelling in. Unable to pay the amount, Ramshundar took the drastic decision of keeping their home mortgage without taking consent from his other children. The family experienced extreme poverty and thus this story portrays how dowry affects an entire family. Mental harassment is a recurrent motif in the story. Nirupama is ostracised on various occasions and reminded that her stature is with the domestic help of the family. A similar pattern can also be traced in the cases we often come across in newspapers wherein a typical demeaning social behaviour can be observed towards the victim's family. Nirupama, like thousands of women across the Indian subcontinent, suffers humiliation in silence considering this to be her fate. Furthermore, we see that the constant dishonour takes a toll on both her mental and physical health. In modern times, this condition can very well be classified as pushing a woman towards malnutrition. Finally, not being able to bear the torture and consistent insult, Nirupama breathes her last. Quite ironically, the Ray Bahadurs spend a huge amount of money on her funeral rites. Unfortunately, when the husband asks his family to send his wife Nirupama to his abode, they write back saying they have found another suitable girl and they have also fixed the dowry amount as twenty thousand which is to be given in cash. The ending of this short story highlights the grave condition of not only a bygone era but also the present times.

Ramshundar's character is well carved out and reflects the condition of a petrified father who feels helpless, humiliated and miserable at the entire situation. Unfortunately, Ramshundar can be said as the representation of what is called "*kanya daya grostho pita*". The story points out the pathetic situation the girl's family goes through for not being able to give dowry. On the other hand, the Ray Bahadurs are exemplary of what a

typical patriarchal society looks like. From humiliating the girl's family to mentally torturing her to death, the Ray Bahadurs showcase ruthlessness to the basic core. The story recovers a scary past which persists in the present times wherein women are oppressed and denied basic rights. Tagore depicts a certain group of women who are forced to live in the framework commanded by the males of the family without questioning, simply living in the darkness to pick up the instructions given by them. This is not only a stark reality of the early twentieth century but also continues in modern-day India. However, he also carves out strong women characters through his body of work which leads with an example of how women can break free from shackles and live life on their own terms. The next segment looks at such a short story by Tagore called *Aparichita* which has a different reaction to the issue of dowry.

Scripting of the New Woman: Rabindranath Tagore's *Aparichita*

Aparichita is a short story where Tagore, on one hand, expresses the ugly practice of dowry, during his contemporary Bengal and on the other, portrays a woman who is the face of a new woman, who voices her views. This story intends to show how education can be significant in challenging the patriarchal oppression of those times. Dowry is a perennial practice practised in Indian society. Tagore unfolds some of the darker sides of Indian marriages and how people were compelled to pay a price for pride and social status. Tagore condemns this and shows the horrifying impacts that it can have on individuals and society as a whole.

Tagore carves out the character of Kalyani with such a progressive approach that he can rightly be hailed as one of the pioneering figures of the initial phases of feminism in India. Anupam is an educated man and an obedient child who despite his education is unable to voice himself for the right things. The maternal uncle of Anupam plays a big role as he has the final word since Anupam's father has expired long before and therefore, he has become the autocrat of the family. This shows how male dominance is ingrained in family setups wherein a patriarch is required to decide for the household. This classic example even persists in numerous households not only in India but across the world. Shambhunath, father of Kalyani, is an educated progressive man of the renaissance Bengal who is concerned about his daughter's overall well being rather than marrying her off at any cost. On the day of marriage, Anupam's maternal uncle starts calculating the amount of dowry and the purity of gold. Anupam's incapability to take a stand against this insult and the overall situation leads Shambhunath to change his decision of marrying his daughter off to this family. He said to himself that if this boy is not in a position to say a word now then how he will probably never take a stand against any wrong done to her wife in future. He is a righteous man and decides that he will not bestow her daughter in such hands who support the system of dowry. It is Shambhunath's education that makes him aware and opens his eyes against such evils existing in society. Shambhunath foresees that the groom's family is filled with pride, brazenness, greed for gold and inhumanity. Despite many social obstacles, he called off the marriage. He realised that he was going to commit a big mistake. He showed the light of education to her daughter and asked her to pursue her higher studies.

Anupam, though feeling guilty, could not protest since there was a norm that the head of the family only has the authority to have the last word. Years later, destiny brings them together. They were travelling in the same train compartment. Anupam's mother was also travelling with them. At the arrival of a bunch of English men, the station guards asked the people to vacate the place. Kalyani revolted and said that everybody has paid for the tickets and no one has the right to ask them to get down. Everybody is shocked to see the courage of a girl agitating against the Britishers. Racial discrimination was rampant in colonial times and Tagore

gives us a glimpse of it in the story. Further, this can be seen as a subversion of the dominator. Kalyani's uprightness and courage were not quite common in women of those times. It is commendable how Tagore is carving out an emerging liberated woman, perhaps the new woman of modern India. Anupam faintly recognised Kalyani and cursed himself for rejecting such an individual. He too is a dynamic character like Kalyani showered with the light of education. He breaks all barriers of the male ego and approaches her once again for marriage. He remains astonished to hear the fact that after that incident of dowry, she decided to dedicate her life to the cause of education for women. She wants to kindle minds with the light of education and wants them to speak for themselves and become independent in life so that evils such as dowry can be done away with. Anupam accepts her decision. It is interesting to note here, that Kalyani is setting herself the task to achieve new goals to bring about a change in society, which is contrary to the identity of feminine behaviour portrayed otherwise in the literature of those times.

Kalyani symbolises the woman of changing times i.e the '*new woman*'. She decides the course of her life on her own and on her terms. Sticking to these ideals firmly, she breaks all the stereotypes. Through Kalyani Tagore tries to awaken the society. The major themes that come to the surface are—dowry, economic independence of women, and education of women and thus women empowerment. Shambhunath is shown as a responsible father who, unlike others, stands against societal norms and dowry and instead urges his daughter to seek light in the path of education and liberation. Tagore portrays an outstanding character way ahead of his time which is not girdled by societal norms. He does what he thinks to be good for his daughter and not what is acceptable in society. This story has strong feministic undertones which assert how the initial phases of the feminist movement looked like.

Conclusion:

Tagore's stories are still relevant as we continue to see heart-breaking instances of domestic violence and abuse against women. Dowry still plays a crucial role in such situations. Women are often age-shamed and how dowry can prove to be the only way to marriage. Dowry as a social practice is entrenched in the societal structures and though social consciousness has set in, we come across innumerable instances frequenting in the newspapers. Due to various crimes against women surrounding this issue, laws have been made and an attempt for execution has been made on a national level for decades now. Irrespective of various laws and policies, crimes related to dowries like domestic violence which includes physical torture or mental harassment, sexual abuse and violence, economic strangulation, even murder and "abetment of suicide" are rampant in today's times as well. However, women have walked a long path in their struggle to overcome such ill practices of the patriarchal society. Women do report crimes to various organisations such as the National Commission for Women, the Ministry of Women and Child Development and other governmental and non-governmental organisations, nowadays. To conclude, it can be said that Tagore not only reflected the stark realities of society but was also a true reformer. He had an eye to build a modern India free of vices. It certainly firms one's belief that women will no longer take the dominance and whims of the patriarchal society and also encourages women to voice themselves against social odds and adversities.

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