

Dena Paona: The Cost of Marriage and the Silent Suffering of Women

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Dena Paona* portrays marriage as an oppressive institution for women in early 20th-century Bengali society. The plot emphasizes the negative effects of dowries, which reduce marriage to a business agreement rather than a partnership built on mutual respect and love. The story's tragic heroine undergoes the social injustice decided to bring about by this tradition, enlightening how women are enslaved in a stringent patriarchal system. Tagore illustrates the silent suffering of wives who are subjected to their in-laws' financial demands while denouncing the commodification of women and the burden of social expectations. In some societies where dowries are still widely used, themes such as gender inequality, women's precarity, and the lack of personal freedom are still relevant today. Tagore raises awareness of women's roles and the importance of marriage founded on equality and dignity through this moving tale. Despite being set in a particular historical period, her work continues to reflect the struggles faced by women today.

Keywords: marriage, dowry, oppression, patriarchy, inequality

Introduction

The Marriage Agreement or Dowry or **দেনাপাওনা** is a Bengali tale written by the greatest short story writer of all time Rabindranath Tagore in 1891. It is a heartbreaking story of Nirupama, the

central character of this tale. She represents the miserable situation of women in contemporary society. The central theme of the story is dowry.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote almost 100 short stories. He was the first author from Bengal to treat the short story as a legitimate art form.. Tagore easily blended stark realism and poetic idealism in his stories that reflected contemporary life in rural and urban Bengal.

Rabindranath portrayed various characters in his tales, but women occupy a special place in his tales. His women rarely break family norms, it seems, like the mold of femininity, to remain immutable. Yet Rabindranath's heroines are not as rebellious as any contemporary feminist. There is resistance but there are no words in the mouths of these women that define it as such.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's short story Dena Paona (1891). The study follows a literary criticism approach, examining the themes, character development, and social commentary present in the text. Primary and secondary sources were consulted to provide historical context on the dowry system in colonial Bengal and its relevance in contemporary society. A comparative analysis with Western literature, particularly Guy de Maupassant's *The Dowry*, was employed to highlight the universality of women's oppression in marriage across cultures.

Summary of the story

In a Bengali family, when a daughter was born, after five sons, the parents named her Nirupama, the inimitable, such an attractive name had never been heard in the family before. Then Nirupama, she grew up. Her family arranged her marriage and she married Rai Bahadur's son. She was mentally tortured in her in-laws' house because her father, Ramshundar Mitra could not meet the offered dowry. Her father, Ramshundar, he sold all his property and finally his house to arrange the dowry but Nirupama forbade him from giving the dowry as she could not accept that because of her marriage and dowry, her family i.e. her parents and elder brothers and their children would lose their house and other property. Then she couldn't meet her parents for a long time even before her last breath.

Due to the tormented life, she was extremely careless about her own health and eventually she died. His funeral rites are performed with great pomp. No one had seen such a large sandalwood funeral pyre in the area. Only the Rai Bahadurs could afford the majestic funeral ceremony.

A Woman's Life and The Story ends here but the dowry system continues as the Raibahadurs were arranging their son's second marriage and "This time the dowry was fixed at 20,000 rupees, all in cash!!!!..."

The analysis

Here the writer has well depicted the bitter reality of our society where woman is worshiped as a goddess and at the same time she is treated as an object to be sold and bought. This is the irony of this hypocritical society. Now to analyze this tale, here are some points where certain critical aspects are brought like -

The situation of women in contemporary society;

In this tale, Tagore has well portrayed the picture of society at that time. Even this image has not yet completely changed, it is the reality even today. The most important aspect of this tale is the treatment of women. The story revolves around Nirupama, the protagonist. Here we can notice two contrasting sides of society or it will be better if I say two contrasting mentalities. That is to say, a little girl is neglected in most cases at birth. Even today we can see that there are many people in our country who abort or kill a girl child, treating her as a curse to the family because people of this mentality think that they have to spend a lot of money like dowry at the time of marriage so all the investment on her will be in vain because she will not inherit the property so a girl child is just a debt. This is why in Maupassant's tale "In the Fields" we can see, Mrs. and Mr. Henri d'Hubières wanted to adopt a son, not a daughter because as they said, "he will be our heir"!

But on the contrary, in this tale of Tagore, we can see that when Nirupama was born, her family celebrated her birth and gave her a fascinating name. They loved him very much and his father almost sold all his property to arrange his marriage with a well-known family, but the contrasting picture enters the story through the mentality of his in-laws who demanded a huge dowry in exchange for their well-educated son. Nirupama was continuously harassed mentally and she could not meet her family, her father after marriage. So mentally tormented Nirupama neglected

her health and this injury of disrespect towards her in her in-laws who represent the society, directed her towards the death bed. But his in-laws celebrated his immersion. Here Tagore has well compared the immersion of the funeral rites of the goddess and Nirupama, presenting the irony of the society.

And another story is when she was born, her own family celebrated that and when she passed away, her in-laws also spent a lot of money to organize a big immersion. It is the most ironic thing to pace with the fast!

Here another important side that we can also see is that our society perhaps celebrates three times for a girl, at her birth, then at the time of her marriage and then at her immersion as if there are only three occasions in the life of a woman, to be born, marriage and childbirth then death. As if society is trying to cage a woman with these three phases of life and thus rob her of her independence.

Society does not want a woman to be educated and economically independent and live her own life freely. Like in this tale, we can see that Nirupama's father spent a lot of money on her marriage and dowry but he did not spend a single rupee on her education, to make her independent. Nirupama's father Ramshunder also represents the company. Each character plays the role of society where no one spends money on a girl's education, no one celebrates her success of independence. So what could we expect from this society other than a dowry death?

The concept of marriage;

Apart from the situation of women, the other most important aspect to analyze in this tale is the concept of marriage in this society. Marriage is considered a sacred ritual where two souls unite and two families bond in a relationship but in our society it is treated as a business where the woman is a commodity and her family has to pay the dowry and the other family earns a lot of money in exchange for their son. Like Tagore, Maupassant also portrayed the same concept of marriage in many of his tales like « **La dot** ». If we see The novel “*Madame Bovary*” by Gustave Flaubert, the concept of marriage is the same, because Charles' mother arranged his marriage with Héloïse Dubuc because she is rich and gets money from her property.

Not everywhere Dowry plays the central role like this tale by Tagore, but the concept of marriage is more or less the same everywhere.

A comparison with the tale, « La dot » by Maupassant;

Maupassant's tale, « **La dot** » (“The Dowry” in English) depicts the same picture of contemporary French society where a woman, Jeanne Cordier is deceived by her husband who cheated her for the dowry and left her devastated in the end. The only difference is that in Tagore's tale, Nirupama's husband was different and opposed her family and married her, although he did not play an important role in this tale. And Nirupama's in-laws were responsible for her end. Regardless, the theme and image of society is the same in both tales where a woman is the victim. So it is obvious that it does not matter whether it is France or India, the image of the company is no different. In this case the West and the East undoubtedly mix!

Conclusion

In the tale *Dena Paona*, Tagore captures the nefarious dowry system in colonized Bengali society. In addition to the austere son-in-law systems, where women were treated as second class citizens, he expertly elucidates the impact these customs impose on gender relations in class stratification. The very core of the story swims in the deep waters of patriarchy and capitalism, revealing how marriages are nothing more than trade deals and women are reduced to bare domestic functionality. The social order puts a tremendous burden upon women, subjugating them as mere moderated.

Nirupama is a middle class woman struggling with systemic issues, showing the world is beyond her quiet rage. She comes to terms with reality over time and evolves from a pathetic defiance to grace empowered with dignity. This is exactly why it is so painful watching her endure the illogical suffering that most have to grapple with because the father cannot afford the dowry. Moving in with the in-laws, bruised emotionally and physically, she emerges a victor as she now gets to sculpt her life in her own way. She instantly becomes empowered.

Through this lens, Tagore gives insight into real-life struggles women are subjugated to deal with. A single glimpse shows us how beauty such as her chosen destiny only works within the context of suffocating traditions. She becomes her own reincarnation. She still defies patriarchal notion, attending in rapt silence, refusing to go back to father's untainted life out of bittersweet

longing which stems towards absolute strength. This never returning stance speaks loud to defiance and calm acceptance of the sad fate crafted by men.

A humanist and a reformist, Tagore employs soft irony and compassion while narrating in order to highlight and critique these social evils. This tale is not simply an account of a woman's misfortune, but rather a depiction of a more severe calamity that befalls women during the period in question. His blending of realism with social commentary and psychological insight is masterful.

To conclude, I would like to say that I have chosen this particular tale of Tagore because it raises a bitter truth of our society which has not yet been totally changed. Even today, we hear of neglect of girl children in case of education, then death due to dowry etc.

There is a specialty of storytelling according to Rabindranath Tagore, “শেষ হয়েও হইল না শেষ” (it ended, but it did not end)! Yes, in this tale the life of the protagonist, Nirupama has come to an end, but the tradition of dowry continues till now, like Tagore's tales, It is over, but it is not the end...!

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