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From a Marginalist Vacuum towards a Nominalist Continuum: A Study of Shoban Bantwal's *The Dowry Bride*

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to explore the ironies of a traditional arranged marriage, the burning social issue of Dowry, other subsequent problems and other inexplicable issues that challenge a woman's life once she steps into the institution of marriage as a bride. It incorporates the psychic motive of the human mind and the disastrous outcome of an iniquitous attitude in the selfish quest for money. Also the paper weaves around the existence of other inexplicable miseries and traumatic issues haunting a woman's life. It delineates how women have been passive and helpless victims of this dogmatic society for generations and compelled to accept their miseries without any retrieve and salvation. Moreover it substantiates how women are under estimated and subjugated even in this modern society. Finally it attempts to prove how dauntlessly women rise up to the occasion and shed the shackles of male oppression to secure a unique identity of their own and strive to build a better tomorrow.

Key Words: Dowry, tradition, female subjugation, woman's identity

Through the rewriting woman do, new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did what they did and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation.

-- (Arora, Neena: Nayantara Saghul and Doris Lessing)

India is a land of diversified languages, spiritual history, traditional roots and a rich cultural heritage from time immemorial. India was influenced by a hierarchical caste system where women held no status in the society. In spite of the considerable progress in the status of woman in every generation, it is obvious that only the degree of suppression has varied with time whereas the sufferings of woman have been a constant factor with varied dimensions. Woman's education in India has emerged as an ideal system to arouse the docile women

and lead them in the path of self confidence. Education has motivated the life of the poor women to start a new career and establish their position in the society. Education has become an essential part of a woman's life and a weapon to rip open the shell of male oppression. Ironically the impact of hegemony is obviously felt even in this modern educated society in spite of globalization, scientific advancements and the career oriented life style of the current generation.

As a part of the Indian culture in the orthodox society, arranged marriages has been adhered as a long customary discipline with rituals and ceremonies usually referred to as 'kanyadhan' or the gift of the virgin. For a traditional woman, early marriage was the only option and sacrifices, her motto. Female infanticide as an approved ethical code among the middle class and lower class families is a classic testimony of the patriarchal social structure. Woman had to obey the orders and serve her in-laws obediently and sacrifice herself selflessly to uphold the dignity of her husband's family. Domestic chores and household were managed only by women and financial authority was in the hands of men.

Indian marriages have been deemed as the sole responsibility of the elders of a family who have been the ultimate decision makers in their children's career and marriage, unlike the European countries. Deviations from arranged marriages have been considered a taboo and disgrace to a family. Youngsters violating the marital norms have been brutally punished. In course of time, modernisation and education started influencing even a common man's lifestyle that dismantled the joint family pattern, restructured the marital norms and the standard of living in India.

Dowry or 'Stridhan' was an essential part of traditional Indian marriages irrespective of caste, creed and religion. In the ancient period, dowry was considered as a secured financial settlement given to a daughter during her marriage when woman was denied a legal heir status to inherit her father's property. But it was not demanded on conditional terms. The dowry varied on

the affordability of the bride's father. But over the period of time, dowry has taken the shape of a burning social issue where the greedy in-laws sell their sons for the highest bid in the marriage market. Their quest for money has driven them to the extent of murdering the brides or subjecting them to physical, mental and verbal harassments. After the marriage the in-laws become the soul custodians of the bride and the dowry received from the bride's family in the form of jewels, clothing, money and immovable property.

The in-laws divide the dowry among the family members and sometimes utilise the same in their daughter's marriage in the form of dowry. The clothing, beddings, sweets and jewels are the only items distributed by the mother in law whereas dowry in the form of money, precious jewels and immovable property is handled and managed by the father in law only. The bride and the groom get only a meagre share in the property got as dowry. Ironically the property received as dowry does not provide any financial security to the bride from her father whereas it turns out into a fortunate income to her in-law's family.

Over the years dowry thus became an emblem of prestige to assert one's financial status to hunt a wealthy bride groom. Moreover marriage has become a pomp and showy religious celebration arranged between two families and not the union of two individual minds. This practice of dowry is still prevalent even in the modern age that poses ordeal threats to womanhood even in the current Indian scenario. Since the under middle class and the poor suffered from a severe financial crisis they could not

afford to raise a good dowry to find a match for their daughters.

In order to escape from the burdens of dowry and the further expenses they had to incur after their daughter's marriage, many families resorted to kill the female foetus soon after their birth. For generations, people considered girl children as burdens and celebrated the birth of male child as an honourable fulfillment of their duties. Men reserved the rights to perform the sacred religious rites and funeral for their parents and gained the legal heir status to inherit their father's property. These drastic setbacks and threshold taxed on women are the classic testimonies of the male hegemony on the subaltern female 'self'. This paper attempts to trace the implications of the patriarchal order wherein woman is held a victim of social issues like dowry, rape and gender bias in the perspective of Shoban Bantwal through her novel *The Dowry Bride*.

Shoban Bantwal, a budding south Asian American novelist is an Indian national by birth. She was born in Belgaum and settled in America. She is well acquainted to the nuances and the characteristic features of the traditional scenario and the rich cultural heritage of the Indian sands. The **Dowry Bride** (2007), **The Forbidden Daughter** (2008), **The Sari Shop Widow** (2009), **The Unexpected Son** (2010), the **Full Moon Bride** (2011) and **The Reluctant Match Maker** (2012) are the meritocratic contributions of Shoba Bantwal to literature. She has received the Golden Leaf Award for her book *The Dowry Bride* in 2008 followed by the National India Book Excellence Award for her novel *Unexpected Son* in the

multi cultural fiction category 2012. Her story titled **Lingering Doubts** won the first place in the New Woman (India) Magazine in 2005 Fiction contest. She has published many articles and short stories in reputed new papers, magazines like the Romantic Times, The Writer, Little India, India Abroad and India Current. She has also written screen play for a few dramas in the Konkani language.

Quite since she has taken up to writing, her prime focus of concern has pivoted around the Indian women folks of the middle class families. She voices against the social injustices like dowry, selective abortion, and social degradation of widows, woman harassments like rapes and exploitation in multifarious dimensions. She calls for a subjective reconstruction of the society targeting the social hierarchy and the cultural barriers of the conservative society. She substantiates how women are under estimated and subjugated even in this modern society. She proves how dauntlessly women rise up to the occasion and shed the shackles of male oppression to secure a unique identity of their own and strive to build a better tomorrow.

As a post modern writer, Bantwal endeavours to explore the ironies of a traditional arranged marriage through her first novel *The Dowry Bride*. The title the dowry bride is suggestive of the burning social issue of dowry, other subsequent problems and other inexplicable issues that challenge a woman's life once she steps into the institution of marriage as a bride. It incorporates the psychic motive of the human mind and the disastrous outcome of

an iniquitous attitude in the selfish quest for money.

Apart from dealing with the major issue of dowry, Bantwal's novel invariably weaves around the existence of other inexplicable miseries and traumatic issues haunting a woman's life. Bantwal explores how women have been passive and helpless victims of this dogmatic society for generations and compelled to accept their miseries without any retrieve and salvation. On a deeper insight into the novel, an undercurrent wave of a bitter plea for women's equality and liberation is obvious to the reader. Bantwal establishes her perception through the female characters namely Aaji, Kiran's grandmother, Mala, Suresh's niece and Mangla Shastri, Megha's mother. Shoshanna Felman rightly points out:

Man alone has thus the privilege of proper meaning of literal identity; femininity as a signifier, cannot signify itself: but it is a metaphor, a figurative substitute; it can but refer to man, to the phallus, as its proper meaning, as its signified. The rhetorical hierarch station of every opposition between the sexes is then such that word difference is suppressed, being totally subsumed by the reference of the feminine; to masculine identity. (1981:62)

The villainous woman protagonist Amma emerges to be a representative of a matriarch who succumb her daughter in law Megha to an extreme degree of victimisation for the sake of Dowry. Born as an illegitimate product to her mother Aaji, mercilessly raped by a scavenger Lingayya, Amma owes her sadistic personality traits and a wild behavior to her father Lingayya. Amma plays the role of hegemony in her family

circle and neighbourhood. She enacts a violent dogma on her subordinates who also asserts her authority over her meek husband and her son Suresh. The dogma enacted by Amma and the aftermath forms the very essence of the story. Megha the prime mover of the novel adds to the dynamic flow of the novel through her acts of 'resistance' who finally proclaims her individual identity as a successful journalist and reconstructs her constraints to assert her womanhood. Through her novel *The Dowry Bride* Shoban Bantwal tries to illustrate the subjugation of woman on grounds of dowry and slavery and the dauntless emergence of a 'new woman' who revitalizes from the verge of marginalisation to rewrite history.

Essentially Bantwal portrays Megha as a vulnerable victim of dowry in the initial stages. Though Megha is beautiful and educated, she hails from an under middle class family. Born in a poor family isn't her sin. Megha gets trapped into the hands of a menial and mediocre groom Suresh who is an utter mismatch to her in features and intellect. The sole backdrop of this compelled arranged marriage owes to the fact that Megha's father is financially unsound and could not afford to raise a good dowry. Bantwal unveils the rolling mystery of marriage revealing the attitude of a typical middle class father from an orthodox back ground thus: "We should consider ourselves lucky that Suresh accepted our Megha for only fifty thousand rupees. Most others were asking for lakhs". (233)

From the day Megha joins her in-laws in marriage she becomes a passive sight of ill treatments, verbal abuses and embarrassments. As the author points out,

...the nasty barbs of Amma, getting reprimanded for the most ridiculous mistakes, the way Suresh ignored her most of the time and then how in the darkness of bed room, he would grab her body as if she were a whore. There was no love, no tenderness, not even a kind look or word...he would take what he wanted, roll over and start to snore. (313)

She adapts to endure all the difficulties adhering to the norms of conduct prescribed and expected of the traditional Indian womanhood. She has been taught to humbly obey the elders and her in-laws right from childhood. So she becomes a victim of a compelled arranged marriage sold as a commodity for a minimum dowry. Yet she strives hard to uphold the dignity of her husband's family as a sincere wife and a worthy daughter-in-law. As Khandelwal observes about Indian marriages:

Marriages are considered permanent and should not be altered by either partner's free choice...divorce was taboo, and considered a sure sign of Americanization. (119-137)

Bantwal ventures to unveil the burning passion of human mind to hunt huge money even at the cost of attempting a cold blooded murder. Bantwal's characterization of Amma the mother in-law and Suresh Megha's husband stand as testimonies to establish her view point. She emphasizes how Suresh and Amma lose basic humanitarian values and turn out to be treacherous murderers with raging insanity in their race for wealth. The most ironical part on Amma is that she hails from an orthodox traditional family strictly adhering to matters concerning ceremonies, rituals,

sacrifices, astrology, sin and rebirth. Amma happens to be a dutiful wife and mother to her family. She adopts fasting practices, performs Puja and remains an ardent believer of god. Yet these orthodox religious practices have literally failed to sanctify her mind and mould her character. These characteristic features of Amma speak for her irrational and superstitious beliefs completely lacking humanitarian values. She has not realised the real essence of life.

On a fine day Amma and Suresh prepare a wood bed to burn Megha alive and plan to put the blame on Megha's carelessness posing it a fire accident. By chance, Megha overhears their conversation and runs away recklessly to save her life. Amma and Suresh have turned into treacherous fanatics who dared a murderous attempt. Suresh could as well draw sympathy from the public as a widower and could easily get wedded to another girl with enough dowries. There could be no evidence of this pre planned murder. By the portrayal of these characters, Bantwal tries to substantiate how financial insecurity and the downtrodden status of a family pose great threat to the mere survival of a woman. She focuses on how a girl becomes utterly choice less to choose her spouse and points out that that financial freedom is the essential need of the hour to lead women from marginalization to a better awakening.

Bantwal proves her artistic craftsmanship in portraying Megha as a vulnerable victim standing at the verge of death who attempts a narrow escape from Amma and Suresh. She has registered the multifaceted spontaneous emotions of frustration, fear, suspicion, hopelessness and anger

outpouring from Megha's heart with credulous effort and a genuine concern. To the world, Megha has been identified a runaway wife deserting her family, violating her duties and the codes of conduct expected of a traditional Indian woman. Adding fuel to fire, Megha makes a narrow escape from the hands of a drunken ruffian who chases her at night. With bruised body and depressed mind, the helpless Megha jumps into the flat of Kiran as a destitute seeking his mercy and help.

The most ironical highlight of the story is that Kiran happens to be the nephew of Megha's husband Suresh. Kiran belongs to an affluent Brahmin family with a strong financial and educational background. Surprisingly Kiran develops a deep admiration and respect for Megha even as his cousin's wife. At the needy hour he becomes her true Samaritan who saves her life with genuine love and concern. Bantwal cherishes the outpouring chemistry of love between Megha and Kiran thus: "She searched his eyes and saw nothing but warmth and honesty".(PG 319) Completely absorbed in Kiran's care and true love, the forbidden attraction between Kiran and Megha builds up, culminating in a sexual intimacy. When reality dawns upon them, culture and tradition pose a great threat and interrogates Megha's chastity. She develops guilt and shame as a traditional woman and attempts suicide by drowning. She is again saved by Kiran when they take an oath to keep their emotional instincts under control.

Kiran is the only positive shelter for Megha in all aspects. He motivates her and instills confidence in her to face the challenges of life with courage. Kiran's role in Megha's

life becomes vital and inevitable. He protects her and takes the responsibility of all her fundamental and psychological needs. The characterization of Appaji, Megha's father in law is also worth mentioning. Though he is a helpless scape goat in the hands of Amma, he helps Megha by giving a financial support of one lakh rupees from his secret savings meant for his daughter. He blesses her and apologises over his inability to save Megha's life by predicting Amma's evil plans. Bantwal remembers to acknowledge the magnanimous attitude of deserving men through her characters Appaji and Kiran in this hierarchical society. On the whole Bantwal does not deviate in to a radical feminist stance but registers her genuine concern over the true sufferings of women.

The characterization of Aaji stands as a milestone in the plot construction and adds to the twist in the story. It involves irreparable scars, hidden secrets and heart rending traumatic experiences that lay as miserable patches of guilt and blemish all through a woman's life. Aaji happened to be a beautiful and educated woman who hailed from an affluent Brahmin background. Lingayya the Bhangi was an untouchable who served as a scavenger in Aaji's house. He eyed on her with a raging carnal desire. One night when her husband was on a business tour and the servant maid left her alone, Lingayya in his drunken state had mercilessly raped her. Aaji's ventures to save herself turned vain. The culprit Lingayya was free. But the innocent Aaji carried the bruises, shame and guilt all through her life. She had to abruptly conceal the secret to uphold her dignity as a woman

from an honourable family. She could never take chances to punish or avenge Lingayya for his treacherous act. She could innocently pray and curse him to suffer and get rid of them. As Bantwal puts it,

The man responsible for it would never be punished...the violation of woman's honor was a matter of shame and degradation ...the sad part was that the victim was left to cope with the trauma all alone (292)

The most heart rending outcome of this dreadful event is that Aaji had conceived with Lingayya child. Since there were no protective measures to avoid or abort pregnancy Aaji had to pretend as if the child belonged to her husband. But the features of the baby posed threats to Aaji since it was dark, ugly and resembled Lingayya. The illegitimate child was none other than Megha's mother- in law Amma. The author conceives the idea that the birth secret of Amma is a testimony of her evil nature which was borne by genetics. In spite of the caste differences that prevailed in India, it is ironical to note that a male belonging to an untouchable downtrodden community could exploit the fragility of a woman and exercise his authority over her irrespective of her educational background or familial status. A woman was rather a slave's slave in this male obsessed society. Aaji had no reprieve from this irrevocable accident and could not revenge or punish Lingayya legally on a dreadful rape case for fear of losing dignity and being mocked by the scornful eyes of the society.

The character of Aaji is in close proximity to that of Megha in the sense that she had also encountered the traumatic experience of

being chased recklessly by a drunkard at night. Fortunately she had the determination to save her life and made a narrow escape. Besides her struggle for a mere survival she had been subjected to a horrible kidnap by a heartless murderer hired by Amma to give her a death sentence. To the reader's horror, poor Megha gets spotted by a spy on her way from Harini's home and gets trapped in the hands of a kidnapper .He directly takes Megha to the cremation ground and sets the funeral pyre to burn her alive as per the orders of Amma. Again she makes a miraculous escape drawing the mercy of the taxi driver. She gets severely injured in this attack and saved by Kiran. Thus Megha becomes a pathetic victim of dowry caught between life and death.

Besides the problem of dowry and physical harassments, Bantwal throws light on other unidentified issues like destitution and gender bias thrust upon woman. This indifferent attitude of the patriarchal order could be attributed as the root cause for the brutal act of the female infanticide. Right from the ancient generations, the orthodox families question the birth of a female child and harassed women dreadfully for their inability to produce a male child. Mangla Shastri, Megha's mother comes out a passive victim of one such ill treatment. The female children were mercilessly neglected and prejudiced whereas female foetuses were aborted in India.

Ironically Megha and her sisters were strictly condemned by their grandparents for having been born as female children. They were denied affection and care. They considered them as products of sin and curse from the ancestors. Traditional families

prohibited women from using cosmetics and condemned pretty women who were believed to draw the attention of men. Megha was also scolded by her father for being a girl child with good looks and accused her dressing sense as a means to seduce young men. The filthy behavior of the boys who teased her in college was simply ignored. As Bantwal uncovers the irresponsible and cowardly attitude of Megha's father:

It is not really the boys, Megha. When you flaunt your beauty that is exactly happens...it always came down to the girl; it was always her mistake. In a male-dominated society it was never theman's fault. (282)

The backdrop of this behavioral psychology from the part of the family members could be attributed to the fact that a girl leaves her parents and settles down for life in her husband's house. So she loses the status of a member in her own family. In a traditional family, men have the rights to perform funerals and conduct ceremonies whereas the service of a woman is completely utilized by her husband's family. The parents have to raise a heavy dowry to settle a suitor for her. They held the responsibility of protecting the girl child. When failed, the family loses its honour and stands underestimated by the society. So the female children were considered a taboo and burden to their own family. As Bantwal registers her stance, "Hindus believed that one had to have a son to perform the last rights, or one's soul would never find Moksha-salvation". (PG 297)

Bantwal proves her artistic craftsmanship in unwinding the most embarrassing

encounters, harrowing a woman's life. The character of Mala, Megha's cousin-in-law emerges to be a classic example of how a woman is humiliated and cornered in a delicate hitch. Mala's natural transition from a girl to woman hood is exaggerated by her parents as per the ethics of religious customs and social pressures. A party is organized to celebrate and announce the same, adhering to the norms of the Indian traditionalism. Mala expresses her deep felt anger and shame to Megha who consoles her with a genuine interest.

Bantwal is a master in weaving through a series of spontaneous emotions like fear suspicion, anger, love, lust, depression, shame and guilt emerging simultaneously in a full swing. The final touch opens up a new dawn for Megha's life. Kiran's love and support makes Megha breathe afresh where she rises up to the occasion to meet the challenges of life. With Kiran's assistance she pursues her M.A degree in journalism and starts up a new career as a writer for a reputed magazine. After the confession about her secret past to Megha, Aaji undergoes a peaceful death. The fear ridden memories haunting Megha's life come to an end. She overcomes shame and guilt and finally ventures a decisive move to redefine her 'self' and tends to reconstruct her life with a practical and a positive outlook.

Bantwal deserves a special note of applause for attempting a daring venture in rupturing the cruel face of a male obsessed hierarchical society. In the light of the burning dowry problem, she breaks open the hidden shell of marginalization of women and its manifestations. By elucidating the passionate physical intimacy of Kiran and

Megha, it is obvious that Bantwal's perception of a sexual bond is unique in the sense that it implies the union of rather two souls that sows seeds of mutual love, confidence and loyalty in each other. She glorifies such a romantic chemistry which according to her is not a carnal union of mere flesh.

Bantwal, through her novel *The Dowry Bride* tries to register the emergence of a new woman, a hard core incarnation of determination and fortitude. She asserts that though women are tender and displaced by biological limitations, they are bestowed with amazing mental caliber and intellectual potentialities. Their inherent capabilities

render them self defensive to handle any drastic situation with courage and prudence. Bantwal also emphasizes on the importance of financial freedom for a woman and the vital role of education in a woman's life as a life saving armour at the needy hour. She presents a daring yet a vivid portrait of the cultural barriers and the existing pattern of man- woman relationship in this modern society. Thus the author succeeds in substantiating her stance wherein she fixes her female protagonist Megha who travels from a Marginalist vacuum towards an invariably reconstructed Nominalist continuum with verve to build a successful tomorrow.

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