

The Plight of the Parents of Every Bride - Dowry

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Abstract: Dowry has been a never-ending problem of the parents of every girl child in many cultures. The practice which was once prevalent in order to cater to the comforts of their newly-married daughter has developed into a deliberate tradition. In the olden days, there was good rainfall and thereby ample harvest. Most of the people never faced any kind of poverty. Thus, they were ready to perform pompous weddings and also send their daughters along with a lot of farm produce and ornaments as a token of their love. As the new couple had to set up a home of their own, and their dear daughter had to henceforth live all by herself – the parents of the girl were willing to provide the girl with material comforts like kitchen utensils, bedroom furniture and a couple of chairs for the living room. All this had been voluntary contribution by the well-to-do parents of the yester years. But as years rolled, things have changed and people got classified into the upper, middle and lower-classes respectively. What practice the rich are able to sustain from the olden practices, has become difficult for the middle-class and an impossible for the lower-class. But the habit of receiving all the good things from the bride's parents has seeped so deeply that the groom's parents began insisting on all those benefits from the bride's parents. The aftermath is what my paper is going to discuss about – with reference to the happenings in a particular Telugu novel *Repati Velugu* by Mrs. Dwivedula Visalakshi.

Key words: Dowry, indebtedness, selling of properties & inhumanity.

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I. FULL ARTICLE

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, dowry “is the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage”. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “the amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage”.

A simple practice of exchanging gifts between the bride's and the groom's parties in consonance with their financial status at the time of the wedding in the good old days has developed into a rampant social evil today. A girl is chosen for marriage not on the basis of her looks or intelligence or character but on the basis of the amount of dowry which she would bring along with her – in form of cash, clothes, ornaments, utensils, furniture and other movable and immovable assets. This practice has seeped into the very roots of culture in India and it has become an indispensable ritual in a marriage.

This evil has found a place in novels also, which help us to understand various stages of this heinous practice as it spread its tentacles in the society time after time. The novel selected for research, *Repati Velugu*, also contains a handful of such instances. These are going to be discussed in this paper.

In Dwivedula Visalakshi's novel *Repati Velugu* (tr. *The New Dawn* by Swati Dhara), we are shown through the eyes of little Sarada, the heavy tension and expenditure involved in performing a girl's marriage. Particularly in middle and lower middle classes, the girl's parents compete with many such aspiring parents by hiking their dowry in order to corner an alliance. The more the dowry and other rich gifts are promised, and the more pompously the wedding is promised to be performed, the more likely it is that the groom's party would be satisfied. The initial estimate of marriage expenses is nearly doubled in most cases as the girl's parents need to fulfil all the wishes from each and every person of the groom's party, leaving them mired in deep debt. They are forced to sell everything they have and furthermore “beg, borrow or steal,” to ensure the happiness of their dear daughter at her in-laws' place. ‘Borrowing and stealing’ come true in the life of Sarada's father, Ramaswami.

Ramaswami's ancestors were well-to-do landlords with enough property which they could lavishly expend and lay a huge banquet for the needy and destitute everyday. This practice depleted the property and by the time it reached Ramaswami's hands, it was barely enough to feed his family. In order to meet the wedding expenses of his eldest daughter, Rajya Lakshmi, (though it was with her own cousin), the mango grove which contributed considerably to the annual income and the rich paddy fields which were feeding the family with rice had to be sold.

The ancestral house which has been providing shelter to generations of his family, and which is supposed to be the shelter for him, his wife and the three remaining children had to be mortgaged for Anasuya's marriage. Even that house "walks away" (was taken away) when Ramaswami is unable to pay the monthly instalments of the loan. They then move to a rented house. Ramaswami applies for a loan on his provident fund in order to celebrate the birth of Rajya Lakshmi's daughter, and to send Anasuya for her family life after marriage, with rich gifts. But his eldest son, Vasu, runs away with the money pursuing dreams of becoming an actor in the movies. Ramaswami is saved from immediate embarrassment through selling Rajya Lakshmi's gold necklace. Angered by this, her in-laws refuse to send her back home till the necklace is restored. When his wife, Annapurna falls seriously ill, Ramaswami, left with no other choice, steals money from his office to buy a new necklace for Rajya Lakshmi and bring her home to fulfil his wife's wish.

Little Sarada ponders over the issues of expenditure linked with marriage and comes up with a question. Rajya Lakshmi's marriage could be performed by selling the mango grove and paddy fields; Anasuya's was performed by selling their house – now how would they perform her own marriage, with nothing else remaining to be sold? This was not just a playful doubt of a young girl of five or six; it has been the situation in our country over the ages. Dowry has become a giant consumer of middle-class parents of the girls of marriageable age – they are being squeezed and sucked of all their monetary and material resources, ultimately leaving them destitute on the roads, or even worse, in jail, like Ramaswami.

At the outset of the novel, we find Sarada surprised to see a commotion going on in the house. The house is echoing with the voices of strangers – men and women of all age groups – the men sitting on chairs and discussing the produce of their farms for that year and women seated on the mats displaying and discussing their grand clothes and jewellery. Her sister, Anasuya, who usually wore a half-saree, has been grandly decked in a red silk saree with a good deal of makeup – she put a red cucumber seed shaped bindi on her forehead, has applied kohl to her eyes, neatly applied some face powder which she had been treasuring dearly over the years, has worn a long gold chain round her neck, the gold bangles sparkling among the tinkling red glass bangles to match with the colour of her dress. She has been sitting on the mat right in front of the groom, stealthily looking at him. Their parents are running busily serving the guests with various food items and discussing very general things.

The groom's parents are pleased and leave, promising to convey their decision soon. The delay in receiving the promised letter increases the anxiety of the parents. The hope which rose up sky high seems to dwindle and reduce to ashes as the days progress. They then learn through someone that another party is willing to offer Rupees Three Thousand as dowry but the groom's parents are still hesitant as they are impressed with Anasuya's looks. So Ramaswami has to offer Rupees Three Thousand if their daughter's hand is to be accepted by Gopala Krishna. The bidding doesn't end with Rupees Three Thousand. There would be expenses almost as much as the dowry itself, before and during the marriage. Even after the completion of the wedding, the bride's parents have to honour the new son-in-law with a variety of gifts in the form of cash or kind on various occasions like when the bride is first sent to the groom's house to begin her family life, when the bride's parents go to her in-laws' place to visit her, when the son-in-law comes to the bride's home for a festival like Sankranti (mainly), when she gets pregnant, to celebrate her pregnancy, expenses during pregnancy and for the delivery, to celebrate the birth of the child, gifts and gold to the new-born, and so on... the cycle continues. The death of the bride's parents does not put an end to these greedy demands – any surviving male relative of the bride has to fulfil these responsibilities on behalf of her parents. Even then, this does not ensure or guarantee the safety, if not the happiness of the girl – there are many instances of bride burning and domestic harassment to illustrate the situation.

There are many instances in the novel where Sarada's mother, due to social pressure and also out of her own anxiety of getting her daughter married, brings for Sarada a couple of alliances. One among them is a twice widowed man in fifties, with a handful of children and grandchildren of marriageable age. His promise of gifting the bride with lot of gold and many silk sarees, his huge house in seven acres of land, a bungalow and a shop which would fetch him a large fortune besides the varied agricultural lands he possessed – attracts Sarada's mother to get her married to him. This is in order to safeguard the comforts of her daughter and also the possibility of acquiring a major share of his property after his demise. This has been the ideology of the parents in lower-middle class and lower-class strata of the society. Unable to reach out to the huge demands of the grooms, they began staking their daughter's happiness for the sake of material comforts from getting her married to an old relic.

A second instance is when Sarada is forced to marry her widowed brother-in-law, due to a dual selfishness where he needed a wife to take care of his four toddler daughters, and Sarada's parents could anyway not give any dowry to get her married to a better and much eligible person.

Sarada learnt not to stoop and yield to her dominating mother, at least in the aspect of marriage. After witnessing the two failed marriages of her elder sisters, Sarada decided to search for a life for herself, unentangled with parental control. Her decision not to marry but to pursue schooling takes her to Hyderabad, to

her employment, and to many things she does on her own, because of her sense of independence and self-confidence. Her confidence is enhanced furthermore when she meets Lalitha, who marries against her parents wishes. When she gets pressurised to marry an ugly man, for the sole reason that he is rich, she elopes with her lover, a man outside her caste and stands against her family, the society and ultimately acquires a well-settled life for themselves. In the last page of the novel, Sarada is shown going forth to meet the man who, she hopes, would lead her into a new dawn, a dawn that is not vitiated by evils like dowry, thereby supporting her parents out of their misery.

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