

**THE EFFECT OF TRAUMA IN SHOBHAN BANTWAL'S
'THE DOWRY BRIDE'**

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Abstract

Trauma Theory and its implications in literature is a versatile area owing to the dynamic nature of trauma and its meaning. Psychological trauma caused by personal, social, or cultural factors, affects and alters an individual's personality and one's life. Trauma studies investigate the effect and impact of trauma and its interpretation in literature and in society. It analyses trauma based on its psychological, social, and cultural significance. Trauma was earlier considered as a post-war effect. Nevertheless, with a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time and with the values attached to it, trauma is that which causes disruption and reorientation of a person's psyche and personality. The present paper studies trauma as an individual predicament that has long-term effects on a person's mental health. The paper examines the trauma experienced by Megha, the central character of Shobhan Bantwal's *The Dowry Bride*, in the wake of a murder attempt on her by her mother-in-law and her husband. Shobhan Bantwal, an American author of Indian origin, deals in her *The Dowry Bride* with gender disparities and dowry abuse that still prevail in India. The paper also analyses the enormous psychological suffering Indian brides endure through domestic violence and harassment for dowry.

Key Words: Trauma Theory, Gender Disparity, Dowry Abuse, Psychological Suffering, Domestic Violence, Harassment

Introduction

The Dowry Bride is the debut novel of Shobhan Bantwal. It was originally published in 2007 and won the 2008 Golden Leaf Award for Best Debut Book. Through this book, Shobhan Bantwal offers an insightful look at India's culture and indicates the challenges most Indian women face on a daily basis. It is a suspenseful passionate story of Megha, the protagonist, who struggles to survive the evils of dowry despite the dowry prohibition Act enacted to curb the practice of dowry. The novel presents the evolution of a young vulnerable woman into a strong independent lady fighting against patriarchy, gender inequality, and trauma in the aftermath of an attempt to murder her.

Shobhan Bantwal was born in an Indian Hindu family in 1951, in Belgaum. She completed her education up to a Master's in sociology from Karnatak University, India. She then moved to New Jersey, United States, after an arranged marriage. She continued her studies in the U.S and got her second Master's Degree in Public Administration from Rider University. Later she took up a job at the New Jersey Department of Labour. Surprisingly she started her writing career in her 50s, with the publication of the excellent work of fiction *The Dowry Bride*. Her other works include *The Forbidden Daughter*, *The Saree Shop Widow*, *The*

Unexpected Son, The Full Moon Bride, and The Reluctant Matchmaker. She highlights contemporary women's issues in an Indian backdrop with romantic elements. The Dowry Bride deals with one such burning issue, Dowry.

Dowry – a Burning Social Evil

India is a land of multiple religions, cultures, traditions, and customs. The institute of marriage is deeply rooted in its customs and traditions. Arranged marriage forms an integral part of Indian culture where marriage is always a family affair and never an individual's choice. Statistics say that about 84 percent of marriages in India are arranged.

In the olden days, brides were purchased by grooms by paying 'Kanyasulkam' or 'Streedhan' or 'Bride Price'. Most of these brides were young girls sold in marriage to old men. Kanyasulkam was prevalent among South Indian Telugu-speaking priestly Brahmins. This evil custom of parents marrying their young pre-pubescent daughters to old men for cash was challenged by many social reformers like Gurajada Apparao. There were other social evils such as child marriages and 'Sati' - a ghastly practice of burning the wife alive along with the dead husband on the funeral pyre. All these evil practices were challenged by many social reformers during British rule and were successfully abolished.

However, the unethical practice of dowry in India has been affecting gravely thousands of brides for decades throughout the country. Dowry originally was initiated as a gift for the bride, by her parents at the time of her marriage, as she was denied the right to parental property. This 'new bride' is inclusive of cash and assets such as a land, house, etc. It is a holding settled on a bride by her parents according to their social and financial status and is intended for the bride's financial independence.

From being a voluntary gift in the form of cash or kind to the bride from her family at the time of marriage, dowry turned out to be the most perilous social evil. The custom seeded greed in the in-laws' families and inflicted violence against the new brides. Dowry has thus come to cast its adverse effect in the society that gradually all parents, irrespective of their socio-economic status became victims of this evil practice.

Dowry violence is the most common form of domestic violence in India. It is generally perpetrated by the in-laws and husband in a bid to extract more amount from the bride's parents. The violence ranges from physical and psychological abuse on a daily basis to gruesome acts like slashing brides with razors or knives and burning them alive by pouring kerosene. There were many cases where women were harassed to the extent that they took solace in suicide. These are all labelled as 'Dowry Deaths'.

Despite the 'Dowry Prohibition Act' passed in India on May 1, 1961, to curb the practice of dowry, and the 1989 amendment which mandated any death or violence levelled at women in the first seven years of marriage would be treated as dowry, many cases of domestic violence and dowry deaths go unreported. Consequently, dowry-related domestic violence is causing a lot of physical and psychological trauma to young brides. The present paper aims at studying the trauma and its effect on Megha, a 21-year-old young bride stirred up by her mother-in-law for dowry.

Trauma Theory

Trauma Studies in Literary Criticism is an evolving field. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* along with Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* gained prominent attention to the field of trauma studies in literary

criticism in 1996. The initial theory of trauma was popularized on the idea that trauma is an anomalous event. This school of trauma theory came to be known as the classic model and is understood in terms of Freud and Lacan as a “return of the repressed and a sense of absence.” (Balaev 5) The Lacanian approach defines trauma as a “recurring sense of absence that undermines knowledge of the extreme experience, thus preventing linguistic value other than a referential expression.” (Balaev 1) This classic model offered comfortable space to a range of critics working outside of post-structuralism due to its notion of trauma’s irreversible damage to the psyche.

Critics such as Caruth, Leys, Cvetkovich, and Michelle Balaev established a psychological framework apart from the classic model. This framework offers multiple conclusions about trauma’s influence upon person, perception, and society. They started to establish the meaning of trauma from a different psychological point. By placing trauma in a larger framework of social psychology and neurobiological theories, they deduced a psychologically informed concept of trauma that acknowledges a number of contextual factors that specify the value of experience.

In literature, newer criticism employs psychoanalytic and semiotic theories to restructure how trauma’s function is to be understood. Contemporary critics thus have developed neo-Lacanian, Neo-Freudian, and new-semiotic approaches by focusing on the rhetorical, semiotic, and social implications of trauma. Many contemporary approaches to trauma are wide-ranging and are referred to as ‘Pluralistic models of Trauma’ and the critics who observe these models are named as ‘revisionists’. The revisionists challenge the concept of trauma as unspeakable and take the standpoint that concedes trauma’s variability in literature and society.

Literary Trauma Theory consists of a “set of practices that place more focus on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience.” (Balaev 3) It suggests that trauma causes disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but a variety of individual and cultural factors influence the values attached to this experience. Contemporary pluralistic approaches in literary trauma theory according to Balaev, claims that

If the larger social, political, and economic practices that influence violence are the background contexts or threads in the fabric of a traumatic experience in the first place, then trauma’s meaning is locatable rather than permanently lost.

The present paper thus studies the trauma caused to Megha as detectable in the larger socio-economic evil practice of dowry that spurred violence on Megha to form the thread in the fabric of Megha’s traumatic experience.

Megha and her Trauma:

Megha Shastry, a 21-year-old young bride was married to Suresh for over a year and is still childless. She was a beautiful, bright, talented, optimistic girl with lots of hopes for the future. She always wished to be a journalist. She completed her degree with flying colours and was planning for her Master’s in Journalism. But the poor economic conditions of her family and the deteriorating health of her father forced her into a loveless marriage with insensitive Suresh. Lakshman Shastry resigned with the thought that, with his poor financial resources and deteriorating health, he could not bring a better match to Megha than that of Ramnaths.

“We would never have found anyone without a big dowry” (Bantwal, 219) was the response of Megha’s father to the retrospect of Megha’s mother that forced Megha into a bad family. Thus dowry was the only reason for Megha’s marriage with Suresh.

Megha addressed Chandramma, her heartless mother in Law as Amma, who always wanted a heavy dowry for her spineless son Suresh. She was the boss of her house and everyone obeyed her no matter what, for her dominant nature. If it was not for the looks of Megha, she would never have settled for such a small dowry. She was very much impressed by the beauty of Megha the moment she saw her. She hoped to have beautiful grandchildren unlike her own. Megha’s father points out talking about the astrologer who arranged his daughter’s marriage.

“I believed he was bribed by that Ramnath woman to find an attractive and intelligent girl for their ugly and dull son.” (Bantwal 220)

She used to take her new daughter-in-law to every place that she went, but soon jealousy took over her as everyone started appreciating Megha’s beauty that reflected culture and intelligence. She stopped taking her to places and made Megha drudge with all household work from dawn to dusk. Moreover, Megha’s father’s default in paying the dowry and Megha’s infertility instigated the devil in Chandramma to action. She plotted with her son to murder Megha in a classic way- by burning her alive.

Megha, always tried to be a good wife to Suresh though he never showed any signs of love for her and Chandramma treated her like a domestic servant. When she heard one dark night, of their plans to burn her alive, she took to her heels with the mere instinct of escaping from the death trap, but with no idea where. The fact that they attempted to burn her alive, traumatized her. While running for her life, she carefully considered all possible options of seeking shelter. Finally, she decided to go to Kunal’s house. Kunal was her husband’s cousin, the only person in that family who treated her with respect and friendliness.

Though she managed to escape from being murdered alive, the trauma, however, haunted her in her sleep in the form of nightmares. She was often dragged out of her nightmare by Kunal.

. . . she had one of her nightmares again. She must have made some noise because she woke up in a cold sweat and found the light on. And Kunal standing beside her bed, concern written all over his face. . . The nightmare proved that despite all these new developments her demons were still very much alive and well. Amma and Suresh still possessed the power to drag her back, soak her in kerosene, and light a match to her. (Bantwal 186)

Thus, Bantwal reveals how Ramnaths' greed for dowry and their savage plan to burn Megha alive traumatized her beyond recovery. She knew that she was safely away from their reach and that they could never trace her, but her traumatized psyche wouldn't leave her at peace. A mere sound in the corridor or neighbouring flat would send chills in her spine. Only when she was feeling safe she was kidnapped by one of the goons sent by Chandramma but she survived the attack. But the trauma multiplied and depression had sucked every ounce of joy from her soul. Even shifting to Mumbai did not help her. It was on Kunal's force that she met a psychiatrist.

“Kunal had insisted that she see a doctor about her nightmares and lack of appetite.” (Bantwal 304)

The psychiatric counselling helped her to find herself back and she moved to Pune to pursue her dream career and got enrolled for a Master's Degree in Journalism. As Bantwal shares, "But her nightmares had not been dispelled completely. They continued to disturb her sleep now and then." (302) These lines reinforce the effect of trauma on Megha as a dowry victim.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that dowry has been the worst social menace in India that traumatized thousands of young brides like Megha. Shobhan Bantwal successfully depicted the ordeals of Megha and her traumatic experiences as a dowry bride.

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