



Literature as a Social Document in a Changing Society: A Critical Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Story 'Profit and Loss'

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ABSTRACT

Literature takes its crude materials from society— its incidents, rituals, customs, and people. On the other hand, literature, film and theatre cast a deep impact on us and arouse our consciousness on the evil sides of social customs and prejudices. After its positive effect, people change their mental makeup and gradually society also changes. Although Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule made some significant and remarkable changes in Indian society, such as the eradication of the Sati Burning system, abolition of Child Marriage, and Caste system, yet, some evil customs like the exchange of dowry at the time of marriage of the daughters are still prevailing in Indian society like a curse which becomes the centre of all post-marital tortures on women. More than a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore portrayed the picture of the evil sides of the dowry system in his short story "Profit and Loss" which is still relevant in contemporary society. This paper tries to critically analyse the condition of women tragically affected by the dowry system as represented in Tagore's short story "Profit and Loss" which is to be treated as a social document.

Introduction:

Literature sometimes serves the purpose of a historical or social document. Although, initially a piece of literature, such as, poetry, drama or fiction is a product of the imaginative creativity of the author, but,

more often than not, it gradually becomes more significant than the mere dry pages of social writings. The British Government restricted the publications of Dinabandhu Mitra's drama *Nil Durpon*, Nabin Chandra Sen's poetry *Palasir Juddha* and the writings of Kaji Nazrul Islam and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, to name a few, because these literary writings portrayed the true picture of the brutal torture of the British administrators on simple native Indian. Therefore, literature can arouse in the reader's mind a sense of social consciousness. Delfin Tolentino Jr. in his monograph *Literary Theory and Critical Practice* rightly observes, "Marxist critics do not accept the formalist idea that a literary work is self-sufficient and can have a meaning on its own. They claim that literature does not exist in a vacuum. It is a product of society and it exists within society. Therefore, the literary work has a definite relationship with society. Marxist literary criticism, therefore, situates the study of literature in the context of social issues. It raises questions about the relevance of literary works to the struggle of people for a better life" (Tolentino, 1997). Like many other evil customs and rituals, the dowry system is still prevailing in Indian society like a curse which becomes the centre of all post-marital tortures on women. More than a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore portrayed the picture of the evil sides of the dowry system in his short story "Profit and Loss" which is still relevant in contemporary Indian society.

Tagore's short story "Profit and Loss": A Contemporary Analysis

It is an undeniable fact that the dowry system is an age-old social custom in Indian society, but the curse of it is suffered by women only, although marriage occurs between men and women. The consequences of this system have left a very deep impact on many pieces of literature in different languages. Rabindranath Tagore has written his famous short story "Dena-Pawna" on the backdrop of this evil system. Rabindranath's story was first published in 1891 in *Hitabadi* literary magazine. Later, it was included in his first anthology of short stories called *Chhoto-golpo* in 1894. Haraprasad Sastri wrote about this anthology: "*Chhotagalpa* is a collection of small but very touching stories... It is also written in support of the Reform movement. Some of these stories will be enjoyed by the orthodox and the non-orthodox community alike" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 2001, p.916). Interestingly, when *Rabindra Granthabali* was published in 1904, Tagore placed "Dena-Pawna" under the category of "Social Picture (Samaj Chitra)". In fact, Tagore's story bears the impact of society and vice-versa it also evokes in readers' minds a strong social consciousness.

Tagore's art is realistic, prosaic and ironic. There is a rare quality in Tagore's short story that the readers remain captivated from the very opening section up to the end. The story begins with the line: "When a daughter was born, after five sons, her parents dotingly named her Nirupama" (Tagore, 2005).

The meaning of the name ‘Nirupama’ is ‘peerless one’. Yes indeed, Nirupama’s suffering was peerless. Ramsundar Mitra arranged the marriage of his daughter Nirupama in a wealthy family of Ray Bahadur. “They asked for a dowry of 10,000 rupees, and many additional gifts” (Tagore, 2005). In haste, Ramsundar agreed to pay, but on the day of the marriage ceremony, he failed to collect the money even after trying from all corners. But surprisingly, the groom agreed to marry. Nirupama stepped into the house of her father-in-law with a head hung down because her father could not pay all the dowry demands. As a result, all kinds of mental torture came into effect on Nirupama. She was neglected by all family members including the servants. Her father Ramsundar used to come to have a glance at his daughter frequently. Due to his unpaid debt, none showed any honour to him too. Eventually, on the advent of Durga puja in Aswin, Ramsundar planned to bring her daughter home. Accordingly, he sold his ancestral house to collect the left portion of the dowry. But nothing remained concealed from his sons. When he came to Nirupama’s father-in-law’s house, he was followed by his eldest son who disclosed the tragic story behind collecting the debt of dowry. Although, Nirupama used to tolerate all mental and physical torture in silence, this time she raised her voice very significantly: “The shame will be greater if you pay the money. Do you think I have no honour? Do you think I am just a money-bag, the more money in it the higher my value? No Father, don’t shame me by paying this money” (Tagore, 2005). The plan to pay the dowry was dismissed. As a result, the amount of torture became higher. On a complex psychological cause, Nirupama also maintained a kind of negligence on herself. She did not keep up good food and clothes. Soon her health was broken down and when she asked for a visit to her father and brothers, she was denied by the mother-in-law. The doctor came once to check up Nirupama on the last day of her life on Earth. The story does not end with the tragic death of Nirupama, but there is left out something noteworthy. The person (Nirupama) who was not well fed like a human being, her funeral rites were arranged with pomp and grandeur! What an ironic overtone! The Ray Bahadur family was bubbling in joy because there would be a second marriage for their son. “This time the dowry was 20,000 rupees, cash down” (Tagore, 2005). One can easily transfer this dowry amount to 20 lakhs or more at present time after a gap of more than a century. However, the situation remains the same. The evil side of the dowry system documented in this short story long ago is significantly present even in present-day daily newspapers. On 30 November 2021, I came across such news in *Anandabazar Patrika* that the husband and mother-in-law were arrested by police for provoking the wife to commit suicide after unbearable violence for not paying the additional dowry. This is the incident in Jhargram, West Bengal. The evil customs die hard.

Now, what was going on in the changing society long after the story was written? After Independence, the Hindu Code Law which includes the Hindu Marriage Act was passed in 1956. The Dowry Prohibition Act was eventually passed in 1961 in the first joint session of Parliament. Manikuntala Sen (1910-1987), an active political member at that time, recorded the passing of the Dowry Prohibition Act and its reaction in society in her autobiography *In Search for Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*, originally *Sediner Kotha* (1982). There is an important chapter in her autobiography titled “The Struggle Against Dowry”. She stresses the need for the women themselves to organise against this practice so demeaning to women. What Manikuntala has written is quite remarkable:

The Hindu Code Law was duly passed but it did not provide beleaguered women respite from the violence that gripped their lives. Even now, thanks to a disgraceful social practice, many women lead lives of anguish, often finding respite only in death. The name of this practice is dowry and many women, irrespective of whether they are poor or rich, are its hunted victims. ... The women could not gather the courage to state, “No, we shall not pay dowry anymore” (Sen, “The Struggle Against Dowry”, 2006).

What Nirupama in Tagore’s story questioned long ago was answered by Manikuntala Sen. She wrote: “The women had no worth in society’s eyes. Her worth lay in terms of ancestral jewelry, money or property that would be given with her” (Sen, “The Struggle Against Dowry”, 2006).

Conclusion:

Rabindranath Tagore happened to be born at a time when history was crowded with events which marked a transition from an old political order, social dispensation and lineaments of culture (Bhattacharya, 2017). Tagore was always far ahead of his time with his modern sensibility. His story “Profit and Loss” represented the condition of women tragically affected by the dowry system. Manikuntala Sen observes, “There is just one way to get rid of this degrading custom. It lies in the hands of women. As long as they do not unite against dowry, this barbaric practice will spread, not diminish” (Sen, “The Struggle Against Dowry”, 2006). This is a clarion call to the new generation of women who are courageous and replete with progressive consciousness. Rabindranath Tagore also portrayed the character of the bridegroom with a bold face to give such a message. The bridegroom who was educated and had a progressive mind rebelled against his Ray Bahadur father’s demand by saying firmly: “This haggling and bartering means nothing to me. I came here to marry, and marry I shall” (Tagore, 2005).

Nevertheless, it is to be noted that social mobility is very slow, and sometimes insignificant, in the case of the abolition of the dowry system. Melissa Mitchell meaningfully points out “Literature has served a purpose that goes far beyond offering itself as an enjoyable pastime for centuries. It has become a powerful vehicle for social change and a conduit for our collective grievances to be aired” (Mitchell 2024). As a matter of fact, Rabindranath Tagore’s enchanting story “Profit and Loss” is to be studied with a serious mind as a piece of social document as it has portrayed the evil custom of the dowry system so realistically that even today find the resemblance of the incidents in daily newspaper or social science research.

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