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‘Rethinking *Kanyadaan*: A Ritual of Honor or a reflection of Gender Inequality?’

Sonam Priya

Department of English, Patna University, Email- Priya.sonam.081@gmail.com

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Abstract

Kanyadaan, a pivotal ritual in the tradition of Mithila is rooted in Hindu philosophy as a sacred act. It symbolises one of the highest forms of *daan* (charitable offering) reflecting its significance as an ultimate act of parental responsibility. In traditional interpretations, its a virtuous act in which a father entrusts his daughter to the groom signifying her transition from the care of parents to the marital protection. Rooted in dharamic traditions, it emphasises sacrifice, duty and safeguarding daughter's well-being within her marital union.

Kanyadaan is also understood as an honor showered upon the bride portraying her as divine being. She is often likened as Goddess Lakshmi, symbolising good fortune and prosperity, signifying that a daughter is not merely being given, but rather seen as blessing to the groom's family. The ceremony is conducted with prayers, deep reverence and rituals emphasizing the respect and solemnity inherent in the act. From this stand point, *Kanyadaan* is not only a ritual but it signifies the parent's commitment in ensuring the protection of their daughter within her marriage.

Hari Mohan Jha, in his novel *Kanyadaan* however employs a blend of rational critique and sharp satire to dismantle the romanticized notion of this ritual. The story of *Buchia* in Lalit Kumar's translation offers a compelling critique of this ritual. Despite her capabilities and intelligence *Buchia's* marriage disregards her well-being. Her plight starkly contrasts the ritual's intended honor and the harsh realities that many women encountered after entering into marriage.

Jha's critique advocates readers to re-think *Kanyadaan*, beyond its traditional interpretations and recognize its ability to uphold the structures of society that limits the freedom and independence of women. The novel urges reconsidering the traditions of marriage prioritising the women's dignity, autonomy and rights over the outdated notions of duty and honour. His work continues to be crucial intervention in looking the customs of society through the lengths of equality and individual freedom.



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Introduction

One of the few rituals that stir emotions among the people of South Asia is kanyadaan. The ritual is significant because the words ‘kanya’ and ‘daan’ mean girl and gift, respectively. This ritual is commonly viewed as a holy offering in which a father offers his daughter to the bridegroom in the presence of the priests and other spectators. The ritual is seen culturally in terms of honor, giving and spiritual blessings. It is said to be one of the most important duties of householders. However, this ritual can also have a dark side because it makes a daughter a subject of giving.

The pertinence of the question is evident from the case of Mithila, where the marriage ceremonies have more to do with the public culture than with the family. The English version of Harimohan Jha’s Kanyadan, translated under the title “The Bride” presents this culture to a broader audience. HarperCollins observes that the novel was first published in 1930 and immediately acquired popularity among the readers of the Maithili community. The same source points to the role of Harimohan Jha as novelist, satirist, critic, and tireless enemy of all kinds of obscurantism and social oppression. In the reviews of Lalit Kumar’s translation, this translation is presented as well-conceived and finely nuanced.

It makes sense because the novel does not only describe the story of marriage. Rather, it presents the rituals of marriage, education, class, family honor, and gender issues through a single satirical structure. In this context, the kanyadaan is not just a religious ritual but a reflection of the social issues. The novel raises an important question that holds relevance even today: When a woman is “given away,” who gets the honor?

In this paper, kanyadaan is interpreted as an event that has to be understood in two senses at once. First, it is a ritual of culture and tradition, which gives prestige and social belonging. At the same time, it is a system that makes people accept gender dominance through turning daughters into objects to give away ritually. By analyzing the close reading of Harimohan Jha’s original work as well as its translation done by Lalit Kumar, it is possible to demonstrate how the book demonstrates the conflict between prestige of the ritual and human equality. HarperCollins defines the book as one about “Indian matchmaking” but at the same time acknowledges that it is an eternal part of Maithili literature history and a satire too.



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Rituals like kanyadaan acquire greater importance in places like Mithila, where rituals play a very important role in determining the cultural identity of people. But the present discourse about gender and ritual forces us to rethink our understanding of this apparently religious ritual. It is very clear that the word daan denotes the action of giving. This leads us to think about concepts like property rights, ownership, and the role of women within the confines of patriarchy. How can we look at a daughter as something to be gifted? Is it just a sign of love and duty, or does it reflect the objectification of women? These are important considerations in the literary depiction of the ritual.

Kanyadan by Harimohan Jha is a unique text in the development of Maithili literature due to the fact that it attempts to deal with such contradictions using satire, not ideological battles. Indeed, the novel is known to be one of the most important works which laid the foundations for modern Maithili literature. It demonstrates a deep criticism of the traditions of the society and its exposure of the absurdity of some customs associated with marriage rituals. Using humor and irony, as well as complex characters, Jha illustrates a society torn between tradition and modernity. The conflict between C. C. Mishra, who is educated in England, and his uneducated wife Buchia exemplifies this contradiction.

Lalit Kumar's English translation of *The Bride: The Maithili Classic Kanyadan* has also increased the readership of the novel. In the wake of his translations of the novel, Kumar remarks that he has translated the text that has brought forward the issues like the education of women and marriages that have nothing to do with compatibility of husband and wife, while at the same time maintaining the distinct cultural context of Mithila (Thakur). In other words, Kumar has made the translation of this text more than just linguistic but rather a means of addressing the social issues inherent in the text once again.

The importance of this text transcends literature; the novel provides an important source for the rituals of Mithila and the complex relationship between the social prestige and gender hierarchy. For the characters of the novel, marriage is more than a union of two people; it is an act in which families perform and negotiate social prestige and reputation. The ritual of kanyadaan turns out to be the place where honor intersects with the expectations from the woman.

The theory of ritual practice by Catherine Bell offers a critical perspective in analyzing the social power of rituals. According to Bell, rituals should not be seen as rigid events but as strategic practices that produce and perpetuate a system of authority (Bell 74). By repetition, rituals gain legitimacy and become a mechanism by which societies establish their relationships and hierarchies. As such, when kanyadaan is analyzed through Bell's



point of view, it can be seen not only as a religious ritual but as a performative ritual that creates gender relationships and reproduces gender norms.

Further analysis will incorporate the feminist point of view on the issue. According to Simone de Beauvoir, woman has traditionally been positioned as "the Other" compared to man (xxii). In the patriarchal society, female identity is often constructed through family and marital status rather than through self-consciousness. In a similar manner, according to Judith Butler, gender is formed through repetition and performance (191). Therefore, marriage rituals become crucial for the construction of femininity and masculinity. Kanyadaan becomes a symbol of these processes and cannot be considered independently of gender performativity and patriarchal discourse.

Harimohan Jha and the Cultural Position of the Text

Indeed, the literary significance of Harimohan Jha cannot be discussed separately from the social relevance of his literary works. HarperCollins calls him "a lifelong crusader against obscurantism and oppressive social practices." The same page refers to the author as "the Vidyapati of modern Maithili prose." Of course, this is not simply another way to compliment a writer. On the contrary, this designation helps one to understand what Kanyadan is actually about – not just about the life of an ordinary Indian family, but about its deliberate literary interpretation.

Moreover, the publication date of the novel, which took place in 1930, should also be considered when discussing Kanyadan. It is evident that in the late 20s of the twentieth century India was passing through significant changes in the social sphere, including colonization and modernization, education dissemination, changes in the concept of companionate marriage, growing desires of middle-class families for a better future and gradual introduction of female education. Indeed, as described by HarperCollins, the book itself revolves around a thirteen-year-old bride named Buchia and an English-educated groom C.C. Mishra, whose illusions are disappointed because of the bride's education.

The translation by Lalit Kumar is also important because translation is always much more than mere words transfer. Translation is always a transfer of culture conflict. This translation exposes a Maithili work to the international audience, but at the same time it exposes how deep the novel is rooted in the culture of Mithila. Put differently, this version of the novel doesn't strip off the novel but on the contrary highlights its structure even better.

The Same Ritual as Gendered Transfer

The issue arises when gift language is used literally and morally. If a daughter is considered a gift, then she can be used grammatically, symbolically, and socially to be given



away. This is what makes kanyadaan very problematic. This practice may promote the notion of “giving” by the father and “receiving” by the husband while the girl will be simply disappearing from the scene in the midst of rituals. She is praised and decorated, but never asked or heard.

Novel by Harimohan Jha is quite illustrative of the situation as it does not give any sermons in dry moral tone. On the contrary, the contradictions are clearly depicted here. Young age and English education of the bride show her vulnerability while in a culture, which still views her as an important ritual object to be proud about. The marriage was organized on the basis of social conventions and not of individual preferences of the bride. Ideal English educated husband's expectations complete the satirical picture as they show how modern ideas can exist in a traditional setting.

This is when the rite ceases to be an act of homage and becomes one of social technology of disparity. The daughter is not only loved but moved. She is not only blessed but transferred. This ritual can thus perpetuate the patriarchal notion that the social worth of a woman lies in getting married. Kanyadaan, in other words, is not only a family ritual. It is a cultural narrative that constructs womanhood by dispossessing women of their identity.

Satire as Social Critique

A very important strength of the Kanyadan by Harimohan Jha is that he criticizes patriarchy without being dogmatic. With the help of satire, Harimohan Jha exposes the inconsistencies of the social system using humor, irony, and characterization. It is significant because most of the reformist literature fails in its purpose when the writers become too serious and too theoretical. Unlike many other reformists, Jha uses another approach: he emphasizes the inconsistency of the social customs through the absurdity of them.

Lalit Kumar managed to convey this feature of the novel in his English translation. The wit of the novel is provided not only through the plot of the story, but also in characters who represent contradictory ideas. The groom wants a young woman, who is educated and glamorous, although the social structure, which created the groom himself, functions according to hierarchical and ritualistic principles. The bride is young but her age is not considered to be a moral problem of the institution, but just its function.

Satire is important in this context in the sense that it reveals that rituals are performed within a context where people do joke, negotiate, rebel, and adapt. Rituals are not only pious but also strategic. The families understand what they are doing, what impression they want to create, and the consequences of straying away from this understanding. That is the brilliance of Jha's satire.



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Gender Inequality Hidden Inside Respectability

Respectability need not exclude inequality, and this is precisely what the main idea of this article is about. Respectability is one of the best masks through which patriarchy can hide itself. Blessing, purity, and honor can mask the very power asymmetries. The praise for the daughter in the ritual of kanyadaan takes place exactly in the point where her autonomy becomes compromised. Therefore, this ritual deserves special attention within contemporary research.

The special focus that the novel places on education of women is noteworthy. First, it should be noted that inability of the bride to recognize the letters is not presented as something personal, but rather as a problem of society. Second, education of the groom helps him feel himself modern and educated and sets the standards for judging the bride. Herein lies a profound irony, modern education does not make people equal sometimes, it simply makes inequality more sophisticated.

As mentioned in the interview about the translation notes, Kanyadan deals with female education and improper marriages, and it is relevant in the current times as well. It is highly evident from the modern times that the problem with the ritual has not been solved yet. Although families may have begun celebrating their daughters more than in the past, the institution of marriage still puts women into a situation where they are forced to adapt, obey, and sacrifice themselves.

Re-reading the Ritual Through Modern Eyes

Reconceptualizing kanyadaan does not mean dismissing the entire cultural tradition in question. Rather, the question is whether all inherited rituals must retain their cultural and moral significance. Rituals endure only when they have meaning, but meaning changes with time. The key question is whether ritualistic symbolic significance can be preserved without reinforcing the existing inequality.

There are, at least, three distinct positions in this context. The first one may involve defending kanyadaan as a spiritually elevated cultural ritual whose purpose is to bless rather than own the woman in question. In this respect, one emphasizes the love for the family and the continuity of the ritual itself. According to this view, one misinterprets the symbolic character of ceremony. Alternatively, one may outright reject this ritual as inherently patriarchal. From this point of view, the notion of “gift” necessarily implies the process of transfer and domination. Third, and most usefully, one might argue for the case of reinterpretation. Rituals are historical forms which could be ethically reconstructed. Emotion and community do not



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have to disappear from marriage; but there has to be a change in focus from gift to relationship, from paternal gift to shared commitment, and from family glory to the honor of the woman being married.

What makes Harimohan Jha's novel so useful is the way in which it leads readers to adopt this third perspective without systematically defining it. The humor makes the ritual form appear questionable. This novel does not demolish the Mithila culture; it only makes the culture look at itself.

Translation and the Ethics of Reading

This translation, by Lalit Kumar, offers an extra benefit. It allows discussion of kanyadaan ritual to go beyond the geographical boundaries without diluting the particularity of the ritual. The English version of *The Bride* is still embedded in the Maithili way of life, yet it also poses more general questions about Indian marriage tradition, gender roles and modernization. HarperCollins introduces the translated novel as "delectable story about Indian matchmaking" and highlights its importance in the history of literary Maithili tradition.

Translation becomes crucial for making some rituals visible beyond the groups that observe them. Once translated, the ritual becomes readable through feminist, anthropological, ritual studies, South Asian modernity and literary satire perspective. In no way does it diminish the text. It makes the text richer. The translated novel is an example of the fact that local traditions are always global in terms of gender, class and power relations.

Thus, the function of the translator is not merely the linguistic one. By translating the novel into English, Lalit Kumar reveals the social criticism already present in the original work. The translation does not create the critique, but just transfers it into another language.

Conclusion

Therefore, is the ritual of kanyadaan an expression of reverence or an indication of gender-based discrimination? The answer to the above question is affirmative in both cases. This double nature of the ritual in question explains its intellectual and ethical significance. The ritual of kanyadaan is indeed a ritual of reverence since it speaks of family traditions, sacred duty, and cultural identity. However, this ritual can be seen as an expression of gender discrimination because of its ability to legitimate the symbolic transfer of a daughter from one authority to another.

The Indian literary work "Kanyadan" by Harimohan Jha as translated into English by Lalit Kumar as "The Bride" is a good example of the above mentioned contradictions in the context of tradition. Instead of criticizing the tradition in a negative way, the author



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gives a very detailed insight into the mechanisms of functioning of such traditions as marriage rituals. Thus, the rituals can be filled with tenderness, joy and even beauty, whereas they have their own deep-rooted asymmetries of power.

Therefore, the true challenge is not one of choosing between reverence and criticism, but rather one of forging a morally adequate language in which women are not objects "given" in marriage but acknowledged as whole people in the context of wedlock. It is wrong to think of cultural reverence as contingent on the subjugation of women. Any society which wants to keep alive the dignity of its ceremonies must also sustain the dignity of the women that those ceremonies celebrate. Harimohan Jha's novel is a reminder of this through literature.

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