

Book Review

Harimohan Jha. (2023). *The Bride: The Maithili Classic Kanyadan* (Lalit Kumar, Trans.). Harper Perennial India, pp. 192. (Original work published 1933)

Manas Ranjan

Assistant Professor

Department of English

College of Vocational Studies

University of Delhi

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many Indian authors, including Fakir Mohan Senapati, Rabindranath Tagore Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Premchand captured the plight of women in their fiction and contributed to the movement aimed at the eradication of social evils. In the Mithila region of Bihar, it was Harimohan Jha (1908-1984), the acclaimed Maithili author and professor of philosophy at Patna University, who raised the issue of ill-matched marriages and the need to educate young girls of Mithila in his novels and short stories, especially in his classic Maithili novel *Kanyadan* (1933). The novel continues to mesmerize common readers, critics, film-makers, and authors, even some ninety years after its publication. But unfortunately, this classic Maithili novel remained untranslated till recently. Maithili is an ancient language with its distinct script, literary heritage, and regional consciousness and is spoken by millions in parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, and Maithil diaspora. Despite that, it is rare to come across a Maithili novel in English translation, which deprives English readers of the pleasure of being acquainted with the robust Maithil humour, and the vibrant world of women characterized by boisterous laughter. In 2022, Lalit Kumar addressed this lacuna by bringing out an English translation of the novel with a rich Introduction.

Harimohan Jha was a prolific short story writer, novelist, poet, literary critic and an ardent advocate of the education of women. While pursuing

his B.A. in English at Patna University, in 1930, Jha was requested to contribute a story to a monthly *Mithila*. He wrote a story around the fundamental problem of a rural household in the Mithila region in Bihar – the difficulty of finding a suitable groom for a 13-year-old daughter (31). This became the first chapter of the novella *Kanyadan*. Its English translation *The Bride* (2022) by Lalit Kumar opens with the following lines:

Once a boy learns English and goes away for higher studies, his father doesn't accept anything less than a thousand rupees in dowry. How can a poor bride's family pay so much money? (33)

The story opens in the same manner as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* establishing the centrality of an advantageous marriage as the fundamental social ethos of Maithil society in colonial India. The name of the thirteen-year-old girl is Buchia. Her mother is highly sceptical about getting a worthy groom (most preferably English-educated). She keeps reprimanding Buchia for not behaving like a mature girl, fearing that a prospective groom might reject her. Her fears turn out to be true when the English-educated groom, C. C. Mishra, abandons Buchia on the "night of Chaturthi" (the night of consummation). He holds a B.A. in English from Banaras Hindu University and has been cut off from the traditional cultures of rural Mithila. He dreams of having a wife, who is proficient in English and Hindi, and who looks like the film star Devika Rani. He could not have married Buchia if he had not been persuaded by Buchia's elder brother, who is also Mishra's college friend. Buchia, as the name itself suggests, is unschooled and therefore unlettered in either English or Hindi, but she can read *Mithila Mihir*, a Maithili-language magazine, as claimed by her brother. By its author's admission, this novella apparently takes up the cause of female education:

Dedicated to... the custodians of society, who shell out thousands of rupees on the education of a boy, but considering it utterly useless to spare even four annas on buying a slate for a girl. (29)

However, the 'dedication' is partially misleading (as becomes evident from the ironic tone of its expression), for education is just one of the themes the story deals with. Harish Trivedi, in the 'Foreword' to this

novella, shows that Indian writing, in the late nineteenth century, abounds in purposive texts advocating social reform. *Kanyasulkam* (Bride Price), a highly influential play in Telugu by Gurajada Apparao, *Kanya Vikraya* (Sale of Girls), a play in Kannada by Dhareshwara Shivarao Naranappa and *Vidhava Kumari* (Virgin Widow), a Marathi novel by Mama Varerkar are some of the texts on a similar theme. Even before him, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay had published numerous works depicting the oppression and suffering of women (x).

But, Harimohan Jha in *The Bride* is more concerned about the vulnerable state of human beings possessing the inherent flaw – hypocrisy – as both the prime cause and consequence of decadence. He develops the background through conflicts between tradition and modernity, contrasts education against illiteracy, and depicts the differences in gender roles. He uses the backdrop of colonial India getting churned between the binaries of education-illiteracy, tradition-modernity, and men-women under the force of capitalist exploitation. However, he is different from the above-mentioned writers in the treatment of his story, for he uses hypocrisy as the motif to develop the plot.

This novel is an emotional roller-coaster of hilarious episodes, in which double standards of characters have been vividly depicted. Even the authorial voice, though inclined towards the bride and critical of the traditional habits of people in the first half of the story, seems to become sympathetic towards the groom and critical of the modern ways of thought towards the end. The earnestness with which Harimohan Jha articulates his reformist sentiments, organically blends the content with the form. The author's impeccable craftsmanship draws readers towards the text.

There is a letter written by the groom before he abandons the bride and runs away through the window (as the doors were locked from the outside for the newlywed couple to enjoy their privacy) on a rainy night:

Dear Revati Babu, it was unfair on your part to deceive me so blatantly.... I have reached the conclusion that your sister is not fit to be my wife.... Your sister doesn't understand literature nor can she have discussions with me on politics... my soul will be restless to share the higher pleasures with someone....

I admit that your sister could cook lunch and dinner for me. But this work can be done by a cook for five rupees a month.... She can satisfy the hunger and thirst of my body but not that of my soul.... I know it's not your sister's fault.... Your father adorned her with ornaments and worshipped her as a goddess but failed to make her erudite and proficient.... I promise to remain a lifelong celibate. As long as I live, I will strive to reform the lives of women. (152-155)

The excerpt shows that a tragedy happened to the groom in no less a degree than it happened to the bride. The Greek philosopher Aristotle says that tragedy befalls those who have a tragic flaw. Was Mishra so stupid to get persuaded? Harimohan Jha's answer is 'no'. The groom is deceived into marrying partly due to his unrealistic desire of marrying a modern woman and partly due to his lack of knowledge about the marriage rites and customs of Mithila. Buchia, for her part, suffers due to her lack of knowledge about the lifestyle of an English-educated person. The story ends with a question – who is responsible for it? This question compels the reader to analyze the situation from different perspectives. With his ironic style of narration, Harimohan Jha points out to the reader to look within, before looking for an answer outside.

Lalit Kumar's translation is eminently readable. In the words of Harish Trivedi,

“[W]hen the bridegroom lifts the bride's veil, he expects to see a real peach” – an idiomatic English phrase used by Lalit Kumar which surely matches or even exceeds whatever Maithili phrase Jha might have used. (xvi)

One of the characteristic features of *The Bride* is its multivocality – the dialogue between local and global, Maithili and English, author and translator, tradition and modernity, educated and unlettered, men and women, author and reader, translator and reader, and so on. It is indeed a timeless story. The pace of the story increases in the second half or it might be that we start getting engrossed in the story.

The book cover, designed by Amit Malhotra, is attractive enough to catch the attention of both common readers and critics. It shows a sketch art, by Aaryama Somayaji, of a bride in yellow paint with the

title of the book printed in red ink against a purple background. The three colours used have both traditional and modern connotations symbolizing the theme of the story.

Harimohan Jha wrote this story in his mother tongue language, Maithili. His decision to write in Maithili instead of English (he was a graduate in English) or Hindi (in which his contemporaries were writing) is a point worth noticing. The reason is simple; his intended readers are women. This novella is in the form of a social satire. The satire is on the condition of women in society. Women were mostly not trained in formal education, but they subscribed to the magazines available in their regional language. *Mithila Mihir*, for instance, is one such magazine mentioned in the book itself (103). This book also had a reputation of being given as a gift to newlywed brides among the Maithili-speaking people. The hypocrisy and the psychological depth of female characters, who are shown to be vulnerable and yet ignorant of their ruined situation as compared to that of men, suggests that the irony is intended more towards women than men.

The translator seems sensitive to the fact that the condition of women has improved remarkably in recent decades – the ratio of girls to boys is higher at least in English classrooms. Being a professor of English, the translator might be aware of this development. The translation successfully attempts to introduce readers to culture-specific expressions from quotidian life such as homemade eatables like ‘adauri’, ‘amaut’, and ‘patua saag’, marriage rituals like ‘chumaon’, ‘kanyadan’, and ‘naina-jogin’. This book includes a detailed ‘Introduction’ at the beginning and a brief ‘Translator’s Note’ at the end of the book to help the reader, both those belonging to the Mithila community and unfamiliar with it, to understand the background as well as the meanings of cultural expressions used in the novella. This is a great book for researchers interested in the Mithila culture and society as well as for those interested in a riveting tale.