

*Dowry: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*. Edited by Tamsin Bradley, Emma Tomalin, and Mangala Subramaniam. London: Zed Books, 2010, 245 pp., \$89.95 (cloth), \$28.95 (paper).

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This collection of essays edited by Bradley, Tomalin, and Subramaniam explores the experiences of South Asian women, primarily Indian and Bangladeshi women, with dowry-based violence. The anthology fills a critical gap in feminist critiques of dowry by providing current accounts using an ethnographic method. The essays collectively address issues related to the production of gender-based violence and successfully merge the viewpoints of academics, practitioners, and activists, making it a truly feminist endeavor. While the larger purpose of the collection is to raise the visibility of issues relating to dowry, the research considers an alternate vantage point in examining dowry—Kandiyoti’s notion of “bargaining with patriarchy,” as described in her 1988 *Gender & Society* article of the same name. The authors consider the possibility that dowry may serve as an avenue for women to negotiate the transition into married life and nicely address representations of dowry as well as the personal narratives of those who have experienced it. Although the chapters cover diverse regions, disciplines, and audiences, they work well together to offer a critical vantage onto dowry, bride burning, and son preference in South Asia.

Bradley’s chapter demonstrates the interface between gender, religion, and dowry for an intersectional approach, arguing that religion as a variable is often left out in both Western and non-Western societies’ understanding of patriarchy. Her point is that the pervasive nature of dowry and gender ideology depends on religion. Dalmia and Lawrence argue that while historical evidence shows that dowry spread to different regions, religious groups, and castes and has been inflated over time, the secondary data show that the real value of net dowry is declining in both north and south India. Jehan provides cutting-edge research on masculinities and dowry—male dowry—in Tamil Nadu, dispelling the myth that dowry is simply a woman’s problem.

The contributors of this volume begin to reexamine the literature on dowry in South Asia, and one of the central ideas is that dowry must be understood from an intersectional approach that includes culture, religion, and the legal

status of women. Here, the collection breaks ground in assessing gender and the current ways dowry negatively affects South Asian women, especially poor, rural women. There is no doubt that the editors and authors included in this volume are in the pursuit of human rights for women. However, the volume falls short in assessing the complex nature of intersectionality, often reducing South Asian women to a homogeneous category victimized by cultural practices. The volume continues to capture Western imperialist forms of feminism and mark Eastern women as marginalized and underprivileged.

First, since every essay emphasizes its own understanding of what constitutes dowry, a concise definition is needed. Also known as *trousseau* in Latin, *dehej* in Hindi, and *meher* in Islamic societies, dowry is the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage. Historically, in South Asian countries—mostly Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—the purpose of a dowry was to provide money or property for the establishment of a new household, to help a husband feed and protect his family, and to give the wife and children some support if he were to die. Dowry is declining in urban, metropolitan cities; nevertheless, dowry continues to be linked problematically to South Asia through gendered forms of violence or dowry murder.

Next, the essays simplistically link dowry to an unjust cultural practice in the lives of South Asian women when, in fact, dowry is a cross-national phenomenon. Dowry was widely practiced in medieval Europe, for example. Dowry also cuts across religion, from Hinduism to Christianity to Islam. When women experience violence due to lack of dowry, the violence is based on their identities as women in general, not as South Asian women in particular. Dowry violence against South Asian women should be more appropriately understood as a form of gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, rather than a function of culture, legal status, and nationalism. This point goes virtually unnoticed. Dowry may be a form of cultural practice, but dowry murder is not. Dowry murder occurs when a woman is murdered by her husband or his family for her family's refusal to pay additional dowry. The woman is typically doused with a flammable liquid such as kerosene and set alight, leading to death by fire. Here, a false relationship is developed between death by fire and Uma Narayan's notion of death by culture.

Hence, the authors are inattentive to the link between dowry and dowry murder. The variable that links the practice of dowry with dowry murder is capitalism. In India, in particular, the practice of dowry, which historically

provided financial safety for married women, has been exploited by men and their families despite numerous legal prohibitions. Such exploitation includes reframing marriage within a capitalist model allowing men to view marriage as a profit-making endeavor. The authors largely fail to recognize that dowry is a cross-cultural practice, while dowry murder is an extreme form of domestic violence.

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### REFERENCE

Kandiyoti, D. 1988. Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society* 2:274-90.