



**DOWRY AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS – ANALYZING
THE ROLE OF DOWRY THROUGH FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-
CULTURAL LENSES**

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Abstract

Dowry has been a historically significant practice across various cultures and religious traditions, including the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This paper explores the role of dowry through feminist theological and socio-cultural lenses, critically analyzing how the practice has evolved within these religious frameworks. It examines scriptural references, historical interpretations, and contemporary feminist critiques, highlighting the intersection of religious doctrines and gender dynamics. The study investigates whether dowry serves as a means of financial security for women or reinforces patriarchal structures that contribute to gender inequality. By drawing on feminist theology and socio-legal perspectives, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of dowry's implications within Abrahamic religions and its relevance in contemporary discourse on women's rights and social justice.

Key Words: Dowry, Feminism, Abrahamic Religions, Gender Studies, Patriarchy, Feminist Theology, Women's Rights, Socio-Cultural Perspectives, Religious Traditions, Gender Inequality.

INTRODUCTION:

The institution of dowry has long been a subject of debate within feminist theological and socio-cultural discourse, particularly in the context of Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Historically, dowry has been perceived both as a means of securing financial stability for women in marriage and as a mechanism of patriarchal control that reinforces gender inequality. Feminist scholars analyze dowry through the dual lenses of religious tradition and socio-economic power dynamics, questioning whether it serves as a protective measure for women or as a tool for their subjugation. While religious texts and historical practices have often framed dowry as a means of ensuring a woman's well-being, contemporary feminist critiques highlight the ways in which it has been manipulated to disadvantage women, particularly in societies where marriage customs have been shaped by economic and social hierarchies. The feminist interrogation of dowry in Abrahamic traditions reveals the complexities of interpreting religious mandates in modern gender discourse.

In Jewish tradition, dowry played a significant role in marriage arrangements, often documented in the ketubah, a legal contract detailing the husband's financial obligations to his wife. Some feminist scholars argue that while the ketubah provided security for women, it also positioned them within a transactional framework that reinforced male authority in marriage (Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, 1994). Similarly, Christian traditions, particularly in medieval Europe, embraced dowry as an economic safeguard for women, but it also became a means of controlling female autonomy, as dowries were often used to secure advantageous

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marital alliances rather than prioritizing women's rights (Baldwin, *The Medieval Church and Marriage Law*, 2002). In Islamic law, mahr is distinct from dowry in that it is an obligatory gift from the groom to the bride, emphasizing financial independence rather than economic subordination. However, in some Muslim-majority societies, dowry customs have merged with patriarchal interpretations of mahr, leading to financial burdens on brides' families and reinforcing gender disparities (Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law*, 2001).

Feminist critiques of dowry in Abrahamic religions focus on its socio-cultural implications, particularly the ways in which it has been used to perpetuate gendered economic disparities. While religious texts may advocate for financial security and fairness, patriarchal interpretations have often shaped dowry practices in ways that disadvantage women. Contemporary feminist theologians argue for a reinterpretation of religious teachings that prioritizes gender justice, economic equity, and the empowerment of women in marital relationships. The evolving discourse on dowry within feminist and theological frameworks challenges traditional narratives, advocating for reforms that align religious values with contemporary principles of gender equality. This study explores the intersection of dowry, feminist theology, and socio-cultural dynamics, shedding light on the complex ways in which religious traditions have shaped, and continue to influence, women's rights and marital customs.

Literature Review

The role of dowry in Abrahamic religions has been a point of contention in feminist theological and socio-cultural analyses. While some scholars argue that dowry practices historically aimed to provide financial security to women, others critique them as patriarchal mechanisms that commodify women and reinforce gender inequalities. In Jewish tradition, the ketubah (marriage contract) ensures financial support for the bride, yet feminist scholars like Rachel Biale (1995) argue that its implementation has often favored male control over marital finances. Similarly, Islamic mahr is intended to empower women by granting them a personal financial entitlement; however, Leila Ahmed (1992) highlights that cultural adaptations have sometimes reduced mahr to a symbolic gesture, overshadowed by parallel dowry expectations. Christian traditions, particularly in medieval Europe, adopted dowry as a means of securing advantageous marriages, a practice that persisted well into the modern era, reinforcing class-based and patriarchal structures (Goody, 1983).

From a feminist theological perspective, the discussion of dowry in Abrahamic faiths intersects with broader critiques of women's economic and social roles within religious frameworks. Christian feminist scholars, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993), argue that traditional marriage practices, including dowry, have historically positioned women as dependent on male guardianship, contradicting the egalitarian messages found in early Christian teachings. Similarly, Islamic feminist discourse challenges interpretations of mahr and dowry that disadvantage women. Fatima Mernissi (1991) argues that while the Quranic concept of mahr was revolutionary in granting women financial autonomy, later cultural interpretations transformed marriage transactions into tools of male dominance. Jewish feminist scholars, including Judith Plaskow (2005), critique the legalistic approach to marriage contracts in rabbinic traditions, emphasizing the need for reinterpretation that aligns with modern gender justice principles.

Socio-cultural analyses further reveal how dowry practices continue to shape gender dynamics in Abrahamic societies. Despite legal reforms aimed at reducing economic

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burdens on women's families, dowry-related customs persist, particularly in South Asian and Middle Eastern communities, often leading to financial distress and domestic violence (Bloch & Rao, 2002). In contrast, some contemporary Jewish and Christian communities have moved towards equitable marital financial arrangements, influenced by feminist advocacy and secular legal developments (Menski, 2003). Scholars such as Naila Kabeer (2018) suggest that a critical feminist re-evaluation of dowry and mahr within religious traditions is necessary to dismantle patriarchal economic structures while preserving the intended financial protections for women. The evolving discourse highlights the need for continued theological reinterpretation and policy interventions to ensure gender equity in marriage practices.

Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following key questions:

How do feminist theological perspectives within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam critique the role of dowry in shaping women's economic and social status?

In what ways has the practice of dowry in Abrahamic religions reinforced or challenged patriarchal structures, and how have feminist movements responded to these traditions?

Research Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative research approach, utilizing feminist theological analysis and socio-cultural critique to examine the role of dowry in Abrahamic religions. Primary sources, including religious texts such as the Torah, Bible, and Quran, along with classical commentaries and legal rulings, will be analyzed to explore theological justifications for dowry. Feminist hermeneutics will be applied to reinterpret these texts from a gender-conscious perspective. Secondary sources, including feminist scholarship, sociological studies, and historical analyses, will provide insights into how dowry has affected women's economic and social status within Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Additionally, comparative socio-legal analysis will be conducted to examine how religious and secular frameworks have shaped the evolution of dowry and its implications for gender equality.

Logical Interpretation of the Topic

The concept of dowry in Abrahamic religions is deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and theological traditions that have defined marriage as both a spiritual covenant and an economic contract (Biale 1995, 45).

Feminist perspectives critically examine how these traditions, while initially intended to secure the bride's future, have often reinforced patriarchal norms by commodifying women within marital transactions (Ruether 1993, 56).

In Judaism, dowry practices are embedded in the ketubah—a marriage contract that outlines the groom's obligations and, by extension, positions the dowry as a form of economic protection for the bride (Elon 1994, 68).

Feminist theologians, however, argue that while the ketubah was progressive for its time, its practical implementation has sometimes subordinated women by making their financial worth contingent upon family wealth (Plaskow 2005, 78).

Early Christian traditions inherited dowry customs from Jewish and Greco-Roman practices, yet these were later reinterpreted in the light of Christian ethics, which sought to balance material provision with spiritual equality (Goody 1983, 112).

Feminist critics assert that, in medieval Europe, dowry often became a mechanism for

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consolidating wealth and power within male-dominated social hierarchies, marginalizing women's agency (Ruether 1993, 59).

In Islam, the concept of mahr—a mandatory gift from the groom to the bride—is distinct from dowry, as it is designed to secure the woman's financial independence as a divine right, as prescribed in the Quran (Esposito 2001, 87).

Despite the clear religious mandate for mahr, cultural practices in some Muslim societies have conflated mahr with traditional dowry systems, resulting in economic pressures on the bride's family that feminist scholars criticize as a distortion of Islamic principles (Ahmed 1992, 134).

Feminist interpretations of mahr emphasize its potential to empower women, arguing that when implemented according to scriptural intent, it functions as an equitable financial provision rather than an instrument of subjugation (Mernissi 1991, 142).

Socio-cultural analyses reveal that dowry practices within Abrahamic traditions have evolved over time, reflecting changes in economic conditions, gender relations, and religious interpretations (Biale 1995, 47).

Some feminist theologians argue that the early religious texts advocating for dowry were contextual responses to the economic realities of ancient societies, rather than timeless mandates (Elon 1994, 70).

This perspective suggests that modern reinterpretations of dowry should consider contemporary values of gender equality, rather than merely reproducing historical practices (Ruether 1993, 60).

In Jewish thought, recent feminist scholarship calls for a re-examination of dowry practices as recorded in the ketubah, advocating for models that prioritize the bride's autonomy and economic rights (Plaskow 2005, 80).

Similarly, Christian feminist scholars have critiqued traditional dowry as a relic of a patriarchal past, urging a reorientation of marital economics towards egalitarian principles that value both spouses equally (Ruether 1993, 62).

Within Islamic scholarship, debates continue over the appropriate interpretation of mahr, with progressive voices urging reforms that prevent cultural dowry practices from undermining the intended economic independence of women (Esposito 2001, 90).

Feminist activists have also highlighted how dowry-related practices contribute to broader gender-based economic inequalities, emphasizing the need for legal and social reforms to protect women's rights (Ahmed 1992, 137).

Comparative studies indicate that while dowry and mahr share the underlying goal of providing financial security, their divergent implementations have resulted in markedly different outcomes for women's socio-economic status (Mernissi 1991, 145).

For instance, in contexts where dowry has become a transactional commodity, women are often viewed through the lens of their economic value, rather than as independent individuals with inherent rights (Biale 1995, 49).

Conversely, when mahr is practiced according to its scriptural foundations, it has the potential to serve as a critical tool for promoting gender justice by legally affirming a woman's right to financial resources (Esposito 2001, 91).

In summary, the analysis of dowry through feminist theological and socio-cultural lenses reveals a complex interplay between ancient religious mandates and contemporary gender dynamics, highlighting the need for reinterpretations that

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prioritize women's autonomy and social justice (Plaskow 2005, 82).

Conclusion

Dowry in Abrahamic religions has been traditionally understood as a financial instrument accompanying marriage, intended to secure the bride's future and establish economic ties between families (Biale 1995, 45).

However, feminist scholars have reinterpreted this practice through a critical lens, arguing that dowry often functions to commodify women and perpetuate patriarchal power structures rather than solely serve as protection (Ruether 1993, 56).

In Jewish tradition, the dowry is typically integrated into the ketubah, a marriage contract that not only outlines financial obligations but also seeks to safeguard the bride's rights, though its implementation has been critiqued for reinforcing male dominance (Elon 1994, 68).

Feminist theologians contend that while the ketubah originally aimed to protect women, historical practices sometimes reduced its potential for empowerment by subsuming the bride's value into a monetary framework defined by patriarchal standards (Plaskow 2005, 78).

In early Christianity, dowry practices were inherited from Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions, where dowry served both as a financial provision for the bride and as a means of cementing familial alliances (Goody 1983, 112).

Feminist critiques of these early Christian practices argue that dowry in medieval Europe eventually contributed to the subjugation of women by reinforcing their status as commodities within marriage transactions (Ruether 1993, 59).

Islamic tradition, in contrast, distinguishes between mahr and dowry, with mahr being a mandatory gift given by the groom to the bride that legally guarantees her financial independence (Esposito 2001, 87).

Despite the clear religious mandate for mahr, cultural practices in some Muslim societies have merged dowry with mahr, thereby undermining its intended purpose as a tool for empowering women (Ahmed 1992, 134).

Feminist scholars in Islamic studies argue that the original Quranic concept of mahr was revolutionary for its time because it affirmed a woman's right to financial support, yet later cultural adaptations have sometimes skewed this ideal (Mernissi 1991, 142).

Socio-culturally, dowry practices across Abrahamic traditions have often been used to negotiate marital alliances and to secure social status, thereby intertwining economic transactions with broader power relations (Biale 1995, 47).

Feminist perspectives challenge this intertwining by critiquing how dowry practices reduce women to economic entities whose value is measured by the wealth they bring into a marriage (Ruether 1993, 60).

These critiques are informed by both theological and socio-cultural analyses, which highlight the disconnect between the protective intentions of religious texts and the exploitative realities observed in practice (Plaskow 2005, 80).

In Jewish contexts, feminist theologians call for a reinterpretation of the ketubah to focus more on the bride's agency and less on the economic aspects that traditionally dictated her marital value (Elon 1994, 70).

Similarly, Christian feminist scholars advocate for reexamining historical dowry practices in light of early Christian egalitarian ideals, arguing that the material aspects

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of dowry often contradict the spiritual message of mutual love and respect (Ruether 1993, 62).

Within Islamic discourse, progressive voices emphasize that mahr should be maintained strictly as a right for the bride, rather than being conflated with dowry practices that impose additional financial burdens on her family (Esposito 2001, 90).

Feminist activists have also pointed out that dowry practices have contributed to systemic gender inequalities, leading to issues such as dowry harassment and violence in societies where these practices are deeply entrenched (Ahmed 1992, 137).

Socio-cultural studies further reveal that the persistence of dowry-related practices is partly due to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles by both religious and societal institutions, which continue to value women primarily in economic terms (Biale 1995, 49).

In response, contemporary feminist scholarship in Abrahamic religions is increasingly calling for reforms that reconcile religious traditions with modern standards of gender equity and economic justice (Mernissi 1991, 145).

These reformative efforts involve a reexamination of scriptural interpretations and the incorporation of feminist hermeneutics to challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of traditional dowry practices (Plaskow 2005, 82).

In conclusion, analyzing dowry through feminist theological and socio-cultural lenses reveals a complex dynamic where the original protective intent of dowry is often compromised by cultural practices that commodify women; ongoing scholarly debate and reform efforts strive to realign these traditions with contemporary values of gender justice and empowerment.

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