

Gold's Social Dynamics: Exploring Dowry, Gender, and Authority in G. R. Indugopan's *Nalanchu Cherupakkkar* (2023)

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Abstract

G. R. Indugopan's *Nalanchu Cherupakkkar* (2023) offers a powerful exploration of Kerala's entrenched dowry system through the lens of gold as an economic, cultural, and symbolic capital. Set in a coastal village, the novel highlights the lived realities of marginalized individuals navigating gendered social hierarchies and material burdens. Through the narrative of Stephy's marriage and her family's struggles, the text reveals how dowry commodifies women, perpetuates patriarchal authority, and is sustained by intertwined social, political, and religious institutions. The novel critically interrogates the dowry's role in reinforcing systemic inequalities while opening spaces for resistance and individual agency. Employing Bourdieu's frameworks, it intricately maps how capital forms operate within cultural practices, shaping identity, power, and social relations in contemporary Kerala.

Keywords: Gender and Patriarchy, Commodification of Women, Kerala Society, Intersectionality, Bourdieu's Theory of Capitals, Marriage and Social Hierarchy, Resistance and Agency

G. R. Indugopan's Malayalam novel *Nalanchu Cherupakkkar* (2023) offers a vivid cross-sectional portrayal of contemporary Kerala society by foregrounding the lived realities of marginalized individuals. Through a narrative steeped in class conflict and gendered struggle, the text constructs a microcosm that exposes the socio-economic disparities shaping modern Kerala. The novel later inspired the 2025 film *Ponman*, directed by Jothish Shankar. 'Pon' in Malayalam denotes 'gold,' while 'man' in English invokes both masculinity and identity, imbuing the film's name with symbolic resonance. The story centres on a man's obsessive pursuit of his lost gold, with a woman positioned as his primary adversary—an antagonism that highlights the cultural and symbolic power of gold within gendered structures of authority, possession, and desire. While the film foregrounds the male characters' relentless pursuit of gold, this paper shifts the lens, positioning gold, a form of dowry, as a contested commodity that both defines and destabilizes human agency, relationships, and identity within Kerala's varied socio-political and cultural landscape. By analysing the text through Bourdieu's conceptual framework of "capitals," this paper interprets the dowry system as a complex structure through which economic, cultural, and symbolic capital are accumulated, exchanged, and contested within Kerala's social field.

Pierre Bourdieu provides a foundational framework for understanding how power, privilege, and social hierarchy are reproduced through multiple forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Bourdieu conceptualizes capital not merely as material wealth

but as accumulated labor, resources, rituals and symbols. His framework offers a lens to analyze how material and symbolic resources intersect with gender, power, and social norms, making it particularly relevant for examining systems like dowry, where wealth, social recognition, and gendered hierarchies converge.

Within the marriage system in Kerala, the dowry itself constitutes a significant form of economic capital, often imposing a substantial financial burden on families. It comprises direct material resources-such as money, property, and gold-that must be accumulated and transferred as part of a marriage alliance. For many families, fulfilling these expectations entails careful saving, borrowing, or even the sacrifice of other essential needs. In this context, economic capital is not merely a measure of wealth but a social instrument, shaping familial decisions and signalling status within the broader community.

The practice of dowry, called as *Stridhanam* in Malayalam, meaning- Womanwealth, has a long-standing presence in India and can be traced back to other ancient societies, including those in Europe. Historically, dowry functioned as a form of inheritance for women from their natal families within patrilineal systems of descent and property transmission. While such practices in Europe and the broader Western world largely declined by the late twentieth century due to industrialization and profound socio-cultural transformations, in India dowry continues to persist in multiple forms despite comparable processes of modernization. Dowry system in Kerala has deep historical and socio-cultural roots shaped by changing traditions and community practices. Initially, dowry was confined largely to certain upper-caste communities such as the Nambudiri Brahmins, while many communities like the matrilineal Nairs traditionally did not practice dowry until the early to mid-20th century. The Syrian Christians, or Nasranis, who trace their origins to the evangelistic work of Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century AD and later adopted the East Syriac liturgical tradition through contact with Syrian and Persian Christians had also practiced the system of dowry. The Latin Catholic community, to which Stephy's family belongs, emerged with the Portuguese influence in the 16th century and adapted the dowry system which was already being practiced by many communities in Kerala. The Portuguese found it profitable and therefore encouraged its continuation (Thomas, 73).

Within the community, the church functions not only as a spiritual authority but also as a regulator of social and familial conduct. Early in the narrative, the parish priest appears as a mediator of a dispute between Bruno and a group of young men, pointedly reminding him that 'your sister's wedding is imminent.' (12, my translation). This moment illustrates how the church, through interventions, simultaneously attempt to uphold communal order and reinforces patriarchal obligations surrounding marriage.

In Kerala, gifting gold becomes part of culture through the process of ritual validation and repetition. It is formalized through social rituals, sanctioned by religious and community norms, and transmitted across generations as a marker of legitimacy. Cultural capital shapes a family's capacity to navigate the marriage market, influencing both negotiation and presentation of the bride. Families endowed with greater cultural capital-through education or connections to elite sections in the society-are better positioned to negotiate dowry expectations and enhance the perceived value of a match.

The novel is set in a coastal village in the Kollam district of Kerala, where social customs and economic pressures converge to structure everyday life. Stephy's marriage is arranged on the condition that she will be given twenty five *pavan* of gold as dowry-a culturally significant and financially burdensome ritual. Stephy, raised by a single mother,

must rely on her irresponsible brother, Bruno, whose loyalty to his political party supersedes familial obligations, to manage the wedding arrangements. Stephy's family exemplifies the constraints of limited cultural capital. She lacks the advantages that come from well-connected or socially prestigious networks, and her brother Bruno's allegiance to his political party further complicates familial authority and decision-making. This dynamic demonstrates how cultural capital-or its absence-intersects with economic and social capital to shape outcomes in marriage arrangements, reinforcing systemic inequalities.

Bourdieu defines social capital as the network of durable social relationships and influence that can be mobilized to gain advantages or resources (21). In the context of dowry, a family's social capital - its connections, reputation, and standing within the community - can facilitate favourable marriage arrangements, reduce dowry demands, or provide support during negotiations. Conversely, limited social capital restricts a family's leverage, making the accumulation and negotiation of dowry more difficult and precarious.

In the novel, Stephy's family is unable to raise the full dowry amount before the wedding, compelling them to rely on a local custom in which relatives and well-wishers contribute on the wedding eve. This practice, while appearing as communal support, is governed by the principle of reciprocity, that means, families that once received such contributions are expected to return them, often more generously. Here, social capital extends beyond individual familial capability, embedding the dowry system within a broader network that includes political parties, church authorities, and kinship ties. Participation in these networks is less voluntary than socially compelled, transforming dowry from a private negotiation into a community-wide obligation.

The circulation of gifts and obligations creates a system in which solidarity disguises coercion-the same networks that ostensibly provide support simultaneously reinforce hierarchical and patriarchal expectations. The dowry system endures not merely because of individual families' actions but because of these collective practices, which normalize and perpetuate the institution across generations. In this way, social capital operates as both a mechanism of advantage and a tool of systemic constraint, while embedding women's commodification within the fabric of community life.

Banking on the anticipated collection, Bruno and his associates approach a local gold agent, Ajesh, seeking an advance. Using the expected wedding contributions as collateral, they persuade Ajesh to supply the gold. However, due to Bruno's reckless behavior, including his temporary suspension from both the political party and the Church, the community's support wanes, leading to a poor turnout in the collection. As a result, Ajesh demands the return of the gold-from Stephy's body-laying bare the transactional nature of dowry and the brutal commodification of the female body.

Despite the significant quantity of gold mobilized for her marriage, it ultimately fails to secure Stephy position or dignity, instead, the very gold becomes a site of contest when Ajesh demands its return from her body. Stephy's value is negotiated through wedding contributions and bodily adornment reflects precisely the socio-cultural logic where factors such as wealth, beauty, and communal status determine a woman's bargaining power. The plot just underscores the fact that dowry is never a safeguard but a mechanism that deepens women's vulnerability, reducing them to negotiable assets within a patriarchal economy. Ajesh's dialogue makes this perspective explicit:

Money is not such a bad thing. Who decides our status? Cash. Do you understand? Cash. If you have ten crores... would you come here like this? Would I? If you give a good amount of money, the girl will get a suitable man. You can get Sardine for 100 rupees. Will you get King Fish?... will you get one? (16, my translation)

Dowry operates as both a marker of social status and a measure of marital desirability, much like the market price of fish dictates its worth. This comparison naturalizes the commodification of women within a dowry economy, reducing female value to transactional exchange. When Bruno voices frustration over his family's financial struggles, Ajesh reassures him by noting that he too will ultimately profit from the system. Ajesh predicts that Bruno, though unemployed, would still command at least twenty-five pavan of gold as dowry, justified by the value of his strong and healthy body. This moment reveals how the dowry system privileges men regardless of their actual economic contribution. Male bodies are imagined as inherently valuable within the marriage market, while women's worth must be supplemented with wealth, gold, and adornment.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital clarifies this asymmetry. Bruno's healthy body functions as symbolic capital, guaranteeing future dowry even in the absence of economic capital (a job). Symbolic capital refers to the prestige, recognition, or authority that a society attaches to certain attributes, allowing them to operate as power. Bruno's assumed value stems not from his labor but from the cultural construction of male bodies as inherently exchangeable and desirable within marriage negotiations. The contrast exposes the patriarchal logic of the dowry economy: women are rendered negotiable assets, while men are positioned as inevitable beneficiaries.

The post-wedding scene where Luciamma, the groom's mother, adjusts the gold on Steffi's body exposes the unsettling dynamics of desire and possession embedded in dowry rituals. The act is not one of maternal care but of inspection and control, where Steffi's body becomes the site upon which wealth is displayed and claimed. Steffi perceives in Luciamma's eyes a gaze of avarice-greed directed at the gold that adorns her body-which she experiences as invasive, almost as if her body itself has been objectified. Her immediate disgust underscores the violence of this conflation: the gold, rather than securing her dignity, estranges her from herself, making her body an exhibit of patriarchal authority.

Gold occupies a distinct position within the dowry system precisely because of its intimate association with women's bodies. Unlike other forms of wealth or exchange, gold is both material and visible, often physically worn or displayed on the bride, making her value immediately legible to onlookers as noted by Oscella,

Gold is a special kind of consumption item, since it is almost cash. It can be converted instantly into a cash value or used at a local blade to raise immediate cash, and can be re-converted equally swiftly, serving as bangle one day, hospital fees the next and bangle again by the end of the week. As jewellery, its monetary equivalent can be (and is) calculated instantly by any onlooker; wedding guests guess with some accuracy the weight and hence value of gold exchanged between bride's and groom's families (134).

The scene in which Ajesh appears at the groom's house on the second day of the wedding to demand the return of his gold highlights Stephy's helplessness as she recounts to her mother that her in-laws have inspected the gold both visually and physically at least forty times, emphasizing the obsessive scrutiny to which her body-and, by extension, her worth-is

subjected. The act of carrying gold is culturally coded as beauty, respectability, and even virtue. A newly married woman is expected to wear and display gold in socially appropriate ways and the narrative makes clear that she has internalized such expectations as part of her habitus.

Stephy's evolving response to the gold underscores her negotiation of agency within the oppressive dowry system. Initially, she experiences guilt for wearing wealth that was not intrinsically hers, internalizing the expectation that a bride's body and adornments exist primarily for the validation of her in-laws and husband. Her confession- "I felt like I should give it to you first. I felt guilty and ashamed. That's true"-reflects the internalized moral and social codes that render women complicit in their own objectification. However, her subsequent declaration, "But not now. My life is important to me now. I don't intend to give it back to you,"(44, My Translation) marks a critical assertion of autonomy. By refusing to return the gold, Stephy reclaims both the material object and, symbolically, her bodily integrity. By redirecting responsibility to the men who orchestrated the exchange, she refuses to accept accountability for a transaction in which she had no agency. Stephy refuses to be a conduit for male advantage, asserting her subjectivity over her commodified representation. Her later refusal marks a conscious break from this internalized subjugation, signalling the emergence of personal agency within a system designed to render her passive.

Stephy's contempt for Bruno and her defiance toward Ajesh underscores the deep inequities embedded in patriarchal and dowry-based systems. By addressing Ajesh and sarcastically highlighting Bruno's physicality- "...he has a good body... Tell him to be a porter"-Stephy exposes the transactional logic that equates male worth with bodily strength and marketable capital, rather than care, empathy, or moral responsibility. Her disdain reflects recognition of the gendered hierarchy that valorises men while relegating women to roles of exchange and obligation. The reference to Bruno's inattention to familial duties- "[h]e didn't think about a sister growing up or a family without a father"-reveals the broader social neglect encoded within these systems, where men can accrue benefits without accountability. Stephy's characterization of her groom as a "monster like a burnt mountain" (46, my translation) underscores the extremity of her alienation and the violence inherent in the marital system. By framing him in such monstrous terms, she externalizes the harm inflicted by patriarchal and transactional marital arrangements, highlighting both emotional and structural oppression.

A parallel assertion of agency appears in Agnus, Stephy's mother, whose involvement with the gold functions as both an act of resistance and a strategic negotiation within patriarchal structures. When summoned to the parish by the priest for talks with the men, Agnus adopts an emancipated stance-she condemns his attempts to control the community's contribution to the wedding and explicitly frames the issue as a social problem rather than a personal shortcoming. Later, Agnus's insistence on requesting money from an acquaintance demonstrates a pragmatic engagement with the prevailing system.

When Mariano, Stephy's husband learns that the gold must be returned to Ajesh, he brutally retorts, "the girls are freely available but gold (67, my translation)" laying bare the violent commodification of women under the dowry system. By making this statement Mariano reduces women to freely circulating objects whose value is secondary to the material wealth they carry, emphasizing that it is the gold, not the bride, that is the primary concern.

In a later scene, Stephy reveals to Ajesh that the gold will be distributed among Mariano's sisters, and she expresses her refusal to let her mother's labor and sacrifice be

transferred to strangers. By framing the gold as the product of her mother's sweat, Stephy highlights the intimate labor and familial investment behind material wealth, emphasizing its symbolic value over economic. Her decision to instruct Ajesh to steal it from Mariano's almarah represents both a subversion and a reclamation. This act asserts moral agency over property linked closely to family and women's labor. It is her attempt to disrupt the expected circulation of wealth dictated by patriarchal and dowry norms and assert moral agency over property intimately connected to her family.

The culmination of the narrative sees Ajesh physically confronting Mariano over the gold, an attempt to assert control that ultimately fails. He then turns to Stephy, proposing both marriage and the return of her gold. Stephy's overnight decision to leave Mariano's household signifies her refusal to remain complicit in a system that commodifies her body and wealth. By gifting a bangle to her sister-in-law before departing, she both acknowledges familial ties and reclaims authority over the circulation of material wealth. In choosing to join Ajesh, Stephy asserts her agency, shaping her future on her own terms rather than submitting to societal or material pressures. Ajesh's remark that Stephy looks beautiful without any gold (110) resonates on multiple levels: at the narrative level, it opposes the cultural fixation on adornment and wealth with an affirmation of intrinsic worth; at the symbolic level, it exposes the extent to which Stephy's identity had been equated with the gold she wore, and gestures toward a redefinition of her value beyond the logic of dowry.

Gold in Kerala functions as more than a material possession; it is a socially and symbolically charged resource that shapes cultural practices, economic strategies, gender relations, and social visibility. In Stephy's experience, it enforces gendered expectations and exposes her vulnerability. When Mariano realizes that his wife has left him, he shows little emotional distress. For him, a wife without gold is stripped of value and utility; she is no longer an asset but a liability, reducing marital bonds to economic calculations within the logic of dowry. Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "the Other" illuminates this condition: women are seen as supplements to men, validated only through what they bring to the marriage—"[s]he is treated as immanent, as a thing possessed by man" (Beauvoir 452).

By the close of the narrative, Ajesh and Stephy step away from the vicious cycle of dowry, offering a glimpse of hope and the possibility of asserting agency within a deeply entrenched patriarchal structure. This fictional resolution signals the possibility of resistance at an individual level. Yet, it starkly contrasts the lived reality in Kerala, where the dowry system continues to exert a pervasive influence over women's lives. Despite decades of legal prohibition and public critique, dowry-related harassment, violence, and deaths remain distressingly common. Many women are driven to suicide under the weight of unbearable demands, while others are subjected to fatal domestic abuse—underscoring the grim persistence of this entrenched cycle.

In the context of dowry, gold embodies multiple forms of capital. Economically, its accumulation and transfer underpin marital negotiations. As cultural capital, gold represents inherited customs and ritual meaning, shaping how families display tradition and negotiate honor. Symbolically, capital is gendered: for men, worth is often tied to physical strength and productivity, while for women it is displaced onto possessions, especially gold, reducing their identity to assets they rarely control. Finally, the networks of relatives, political groups, and church communities that contribute to or enforce dowry obligations reflect social capital—a collective resource that appears supportive but often functions as coercive reciprocity.

Thus, gold as dowry condenses cultural meaning, economic value, and symbolic recognition into a single commodity. More than a financial transaction, dowry operates as a deeply entrenched social mechanism. It structures gender relations, consolidates patriarchal authority, and reproduces hierarchies under the guise of tradition and honor, ensuring that gold continues to shape both individual lives and collective identities in Kerala.

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