



Mahar as a Form of Self-Validation: A Humanistic Psychology Review

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the psychological meaning of *mahar* in Islamic marriage through a humanistic psychology approach, particularly Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Carl Rogers' self theory. In modern society, *mahar* is no longer seen merely as a religious obligation but has shifted in meaning to become a symbol of status, self-esteem, and emotional validation. This research uses a literature review method with relevant primary and secondary sources, analyzed through data reduction, theme categorization, meaning interpretation, and drawing conclusions. The findings indicate that *mahar* can serve as a medium for self-validation that strengthens self-esteem and the emotional bond between partners when agreed upon consciously and authentically. However, distortions of the meaning of *mahar*, such as social pressure, family demands, and status symbols, can cause psychological burdens, relational imbalances, and damage the foundation of marriage. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and self-actualization in building healthy and meaningful relationships. Therefore, reinterpreting *mahar* as a form of respect and true love is crucial for establishing a marriage based on spiritual and humanitarian values.

Keywords: *mahar* (dowry), humanistic psychology, self validation, Islamic marriage

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is one of the important phases in human life that is not only legal and spiritual but also has a deeply psychological dimension [1]. In the context of Islamic marriage, *mahar* or dowry holds a sacred and obligatory position, as it is part of the pillars of marriage [2]. Legally, *mahar* is understood as a gift from the groom to the bride as a sign of seriousness, a symbol of responsibility, and a form of respect [3]. However, in modern social reality, the meaning of *mahar* often goes beyond legal and religious boundaries, entering a complex psychological realm.

The developing social phenomenon shows that *mahar* is no longer viewed solely as a religious obligation but has transformed into a symbol of status, self-worth, and even social prestige. For

some women, the value or form of *mahar* reflects how their partner perceives and respects them. Meanwhile, for men, *mahar* is sometimes seen as a measure of capability and proof of love. When there is a mismatch between expectations and reality regarding *mahar*, emotional tension, family conflicts, and even the cancellation of marriages often arise. This indicates that *mahar* cannot be separated from the psychological aspects underlying it [4].

One relevant approach to understanding the psychological aspects of *mahar* is humanistic psychology. This school of thought views humans as beings with needs to feel valued, loved, and recognized in their existence. In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the needs for esteem and self-actualization hold important positions after basic needs are fulfilled. In this context, *mahar* can be seen as an external form of fulfilling these needs, particularly the need for self-validation [5]. Similarly, in Carl Rogers' perspective, unconditional positive regard is key to healthy relationships, including marital relationships. If *mahar* is perceived as a form of appreciation and unconditional acceptance, it has the potential to strengthen emotional bonds and enhance the psychological well-being of the partners [6].

However, when *mahar* is excessively understood or misconstrued, for example as a measure of

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social status or a means of self-assertion, its psychological meaning can shift into emotional pressure. Imbalances in interpreting *mahar* can lead to feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and even interpersonal relationship disturbances. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the meaning of *mahar* as a form of self-validation within the framework of humanistic psychology is necessary.

Through this study, the author seeks to explore how *mahar* is psychologically understood by individuals, particularly in the context of the need for esteem and self-acceptance. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide new perspectives for premarital counselors, academics, and the general public to better understand the inner dimension of the *mahar* practice in Muslim married life.

2. METHODS

The research will employ a qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective to explore the subjective meaning of dowry (*mahar*) as a mechanism for self-validation. Given that the study is anchored in Humanistic Psychology, the primary objective is to capture the "lived experience" of individuals and understand how they navigate their sense of self-worth and agency through this cultural practice.

The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is selected because it allows for a deep dive into how participants perceive their social reality, specifically focusing on how *mahar* functions as a symbolic affirmation of their existential value. Data collection will primarily involve semi-structured in-depth interviews, designed to elicit rich, personal narratives regarding the negotiation and receipt of the dowry.

The analytical process will use Thematic Analysis through a Humanistic lens—utilizing frameworks such as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of esteem needs and Carl Rogers' concepts of self-worth and "conditions of worth." By synthesizing these psychological theories with qualitative data, the study aims to uncover whether *mahar* serves as a bridge toward self-actualization or acts as an external condition that complicates the individual's internal congruence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. *Mahar as a Symbol of Acceptance and Appreciation*

In Islamic tradition, *mahar* (*shidaq*) is something that becomes obligatory with marriage or consummation. It is called *shidaq* because it conveys the impression that the giver is truly pleased to enter into the marriage bond [7]. Although its legal function is symbolic and does not necessarily have to be in a large amount, in social practice, *mahar* is often given deeper meaning as a form of appreciation toward the woman.

In humanistic psychology, the giving of *mahar* can be seen as fulfilling Maslow's esteem needs, which involve respect and recognition. *Mahar* is not just a material gift but a symbol of valuing and honoring the partner, boosting their sense of self-worth. This act supports personal growth and positive relationships, aligning with the humanistic focus on self-actualization and psychological well-being [8].

The need for esteem encompasses two aspects: esteem from others (respect, recognition) and self-esteem (self-respect). For women, the *mahar* given by their partner is not only material but also a symbol of acceptance and acknowledgment of their existence as individuals worthy of love, respect, and a legitimate bond. Conversely, for men, *mahar* often represents commitment, responsibility, and the ability to meet the symbolic demands of their partner [9].

In many cases, *mahar* is not only understood by women as a material form but also as a reflection of how men perceive their own value and dignity. Acceptance of *mahar* often involves deep emotional aspects, such as feeling valued, prioritized, and deemed worthy of being fought for. In certain cultures, the size of the *mahar* can represent a person's sincerity, genuineness, and commitment to building the relationship [10]. Therefore, the process of determining and giving *mahar* is not merely a transaction but a symbolic space for mutual recognition and affirmation of each party's emotional position.

This phenomenon can be explained within the framework of symbolic psychology, where an object or action is valued not only for its functional worth but also for the meaning it carries. *Mahar*,

although it can be very simple in form, holds symbolic significance capable of conveying messages of love, appreciation, and willingness to build a life together. Therefore, a woman receiving *mahar* often accepts not just a physical item but also an affirmation of her self-worth. Similarly, a man giving *mahar* is also expressing his commitment and readiness in a tangible form [11].

From Carl Rogers' perspective, healthy interpersonal relationships must be built on the basis of unconditional positive regard [12]. In this context, *mahar* that is given without pressure, without high expectations from family, and based on a fair agreement reflects a healthy, balanced, and trusting relationship. When a woman feels that the *mahar* she receives is the result of honest communication and mutual agreement, a sense of security and complete acceptance by her partner arises. This sense of security becomes the foundational basis for the formation of psychological well-being within the marital relationship [13].

Conversely, if *mahar* is given solely to meet social expectations or for family prestige, the relationship between the couple can become distorted. Acceptance based on social standards or external pressure loses the essence of sincerity and emotional warmth. A woman may feel valued only because she receives a high *mahar*, not because she is genuinely loved. On the other hand, men may experience psychological pressure that disrupts their perception of the relationship, potentially leading to long-term conflicts. This situation shows that the symbolic meaning of *mahar* is highly determined by the psychological context and the values mutually agreed upon by both parties.

Furthermore, the symbolism of *mahar* as a form of appreciation can also influence the dynamics of long-term relationships. Couples who begin their marriage with mutual respect, where *mahar* serves as a medium of expressing love and recognizing each other's value, tend to have healthier relationship quality [14]. Feeling valued from the start of the relationship strengthens self-esteem and trust in the partner. Conversely, relationships that begin with tension due to the value of *mahar* or differing perceptions about its worth can cause hidden psychological wounds that impact the adaptation process in married life. Therefore,

understanding *mahar* not only in terms of its size but also its intention, meaning, and the way it is communicated between partners is a crucial aspect that should not be overlooked.

3.2. *Mahar and Self-Validation: A Humanistic Psychology Perspective*

Self-validation in humanistic psychology is the process by which an individual feels that their existence is genuinely recognized and accepted by others unconditionally. According to Carl Rogers, the experience of unconditional positive regard is a fundamental foundation in shaping an individual's self-worth and congruence.

The giving of *mahar*, when received sincerely, can create a positive psychological experience in which the woman feels valued not because of its economic worth, but because of her partner's love and acceptance of her. This directly impacts the enhancement of self-esteem and confidence, which in turn strengthens the psychological foundation for building a household [15].

However, if the *mahar* is treated in a transactional manner or becomes a means to display wealth and social status, the meaning of self-validation becomes distorted. Acceptance of a partner is no longer based on love and sincerity, but solely on fulfilling economic conditions. This can lead individuals to feel that they are not truly loved sincerely, but rather bought, which ultimately damages their sense of self-worth [16].

In the framework of humanistic psychology, self-validation is not just about external recognition, but more about the inner experience of being fully accepted as a whole person. In the context of marriage, the *mahar* often becomes a symbolic moment that holds great meaning for women, as it represents whether they are truly valued or merely going through a cultural formality. When a woman sees the *mahar* as a tangible expression of love, respect, and the partner's sincerity, it strengthens her sense of being fully accepted, which directly impacts her self-worth.

Carl Rogers stated that every individual has a basic need to feel valued and unconditionally accepted. In premarital relationships, when the *mahar* is agreed upon through open communication, fairness, and reflects emotional mutual understanding, a woman can experience

unconditional positive regard from her partner. This validation reduces anxiety, increases self-confidence, and creates the foundation for an empathetic and healthy relationship. Conversely, when the *mahar* becomes a site for negotiating dominance between families, the value of validation can be replaced by social pressure that undermines the couple's psychological balance.

A *mahar* that is too high or unilaterally determined by the extended family can sometimes make a woman feel awkward or uncomfortable. While socially she may be considered of high value, psychologically, this can create an emotional distance between her and her partner. She may feel that she is not loved for who she is, but because of external demands. In many cases, women also experience inner conflict when choosing between expressing their desire for a simple *mahar* or complying with their parents' expectations. This situation can obscure the meaning of self-validation and replace it with a feeling of being trapped in a value system that she does not desire.

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From the male perspective, self-validation is also an important issue. When he is able to provide a *mahar* according to his desires and it is well-received by his partner, it strengthens his self-worth as a future head of the family. However, if the *mahar* is forced beyond his means in order to meet social expectations, he becomes vulnerable to feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and even the sense that he is only valued for his economic ability. This aligns with the critique in humanistic psychology of societal systems that place too much emphasis on external validation rather than authentic acceptance between individuals.

Furthermore, a healthy relationship is built on the foundation of authenticity in expressing love and commitment. A *mahar* that is perceived as a genuine expression of affection, rather than a cultural obligation, will hold more psychological meaning. When partners are able to build open communication about the *mahar*—why it takes the form it does, the philosophy behind it, and how it reflects their relationship values—the *mahar* serves not only as a marriage requirement but also as a reflection of emotional maturity and the ability to validate each other. This is the essence of humanistic psychology, which emphasizes the importance of personal growth through sincere and equal relationships.

3.3. *Mahar and Self-Actualization*

At the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization refers to the full realization of an individual's potential, including the capacity to love and form meaningful relationships. In a marital relationship, the *mahar* can be a part of this process of self-actualization when it is positioned as a genuine and conscious expression of love.

A simple yet meaningful *mahar*, such as the memorization of the Qur'an, prayer tools, or other symbolic items agreed upon together, shows that the individual has transcended the need for mere external recognition and is more focused on spiritual, personal, and relational values. This reflects an individual who has matured psychologically and is ready to build a healthy and equal relationship [18].

On the other hand, when self-actualization is hindered by external demands (such as family pressure to set a high *mahar*), the couple may experience inner conflict. The man may feel like a failure as a provider, while the woman may feel guilty or uncomfortable if she is seen as too demanding. This disharmony negatively impacts the post-marriage adaptation process.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization is at the peak of the pyramid, representing the ideal condition where an individual is able to realize their highest potential and live authentically. In the context of marital relationships, a *mahar* that is consciously and reflectively agreed upon can become the starting point for self-actualization, both for men and women. The *mahar*

is not just a material symbol, but also a statement of the values the couple believes in regarding life, love, and commitment. When partners agree on a *mahar* that is personally meaningful, it reflects psychological maturity and full awareness of their life choices.

Self-actualization in a marital relationship is marked by the ability to love selflessly, open communication, and the desire to grow together as individuals who support each other. In this context, the *mahar* is not only the fulfillment of religious obligations, but also an expression of shared values that the couple believes in as the foundation of their marriage. For example, a couple that chooses a *mahar* in the form of written work, memorization of a Qur'anic verse, or another symbolic form with emotional significance, demonstrates that they have moved beyond a materialistic mindset and entered a deeper dimension of meaning. This is a form of spiritual and emotional self-actualization that aligns with the values of humanistic psychology.

On the other hand, when the *mahar* is treated as a burden or obligation that must be paid off forcefully to meet family or societal norms, individuals may face obstacles in their self-actualization process. Women may feel guilty for rejecting a high *mahar*, even if it goes against their life principles, while men may feel they have lost control over a decision-making process that should be personal. This imbalance creates a situation where the couple fails to realize their full potential in forming an equal and authentic relationship. In the long term, this can hinder emotional growth, psychological intimacy, and marital satisfaction [19].

Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of a meaningful life that aligns with personal values. In a marital relationship, this means that every decision, including the *mahar*, must be grounded in self-reflection, full awareness, and respect for each individual's values. When couples are able to make the *mahar* a means of actualizing their spiritual, cultural, and emotional values, marriage becomes not just a fulfillment of social norms, but also a space for growth to create a more meaningful life.

Furthermore, self-actualization through the *mahar* also touches on a broader social realm. Couples who dare to oppose the norm of a high

mahar for the sake of simplicity and the value of blessings often become an inspiration to those around them. They are demonstrating that self-actualization is not just about personal achievement, but also about the courage to express the values they believe in, even if it goes against the dominant current. In this sense, the *mahar* becomes a symbol of resistance against social pressure, while also serving as a means to strengthen personal identity and authentic life values.

3.4. Distortion of the Meaning of Mahar and Its Psychological Impact

In the social reality of many Muslim communities, especially those still influenced by patriarchal structures and competitive cultures, the *mahar* is often used as a measure of a woman's value and the family's prestige. This has the potential to create psychological pressure on both parties: women feel the need to uphold their family's dignity with a worthy *mahar* [20], while men feel burdened both economically and mentally [21].

This pressure leads to psychological issues such as anxiety, premarital stress, and even a fear of commitment. When the *mahar* becomes the primary basis for evaluating a relationship, the values of love, sincerity, and genuineness can be reduced, and the marriage relationship loses its spiritual and emotional meaning.

Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of authenticity and acceptance in human relationships. Therefore, it is crucial for society to reflect on the meaning of the *mahar*, so that it is not seen merely as a formality, but as a symbol of the deep inner communication between two individuals who are about to build a life together.

One of the most common distortions of the meaning of the *mahar* occurs when it is used as a measure of social status or family prestige. In cultures that are still strongly influenced by feudal and patriarchal values, the *mahar* is often turned into a competition of status between extended families, rather than a symbol of love and commitment between individuals. As a result, the *mahar* loses its personal and spiritual meaning and becomes a rigid demand. This creates pressure, especially for men who must meet the expectations of the woman's family, even when they are not yet

financially stable. When the value of the *mahar* is determined more by the desire to appear high-class, the couple's relationship risks losing the honesty and simplicity that should be the foundation of marriage [22].

Furthermore, the pressure to provide a large *mahar* can lead to psychological distress, such as anxiety, feelings of inferiority, and even the postponement or cancellation of the marriage. In many cases, men feel that their value is only measured by their material ability, rather than by their personality, faith, or emotional commitment. This condition is in stark contrast to the principles of humanistic psychology, which views humans as valuable for their potential and inner depth, not because of external attributes. When someone feels 'not valuable' simply because they cannot provide a high *mahar*, it can create long-lasting psychological wounds, even after the marriage takes place.

On the other hand, women are also not immune to the negative psychological effects of the distorted meaning of the *mahar*. Many women feel guilty, awkward, or pressured when their families demand an unrealistic *mahar*. In some cases, they find themselves trapped in a dilemma between respecting their parents' decision or maintaining their partner's emotional comfort. This tension can lead to inner conflict, which, if not resolved maturely, may become a source of strain in the marital relationship going forward. Women may also feel that their love and acceptance are conditional—dependent on the financial ability of their future husband—which is in direct contrast to the principle of unconditional positive regard in humanistic psychology.

The distortion of the meaning of the *mahar* is also dangerous because it can create an imbalanced relationship from the very beginning. When the *mahar* is seen as the 'price' paid by the man to 'own' the woman, the potential for power imbalances in the household becomes very high. The man may feel he has dominant rights over his wife because he feels he has 'paid,' while the woman may feel obliged to submit or repay the *mahar* that has been given. This kind of relational pattern risks fostering an unhealthy psychological relationship, full of pressure and lacking empathy. In contrast, from a humanistic perspective, the ideal relationship is one that is egalitarian, mutually accepting, and supports

the growth of each individual.

Therefore, it is important to socially deconstruct the distorted meaning of the *mahar* and restore it to its foundational spiritual and psychological values. The *mahar* should be a symbol of authentic love, not an arena for social competition. Education for the public, especially through premarital counseling, is necessary to build the understanding that self-validation does not depend on the amount of the *mahar*, but on the quality of the relationship being built. In the context of humanistic psychology, reinterpreting the *mahar* as a form of acceptance and self-appreciation is key to creating a healthy, balanced, and mutually growing marital relationship.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In Islamic marriage, the *mahar* is a symbol of the bond and commitment that carries deep spiritual, social, and psychological meaning. From a humanistic psychology perspective, the *mahar* can be seen as a form of self-validation that strengthens personal identity and existence, particularly for women. When the *mahar* is agreed upon consciously and reflectively by both parties, it becomes a means of self-actualization that supports the growth of a healthy, authentic, and meaningful relationship. However, in practice, the meaning of the *mahar* is often distorted. It is frequently treated as a symbol of social prestige or a bargaining tool in economic negotiations, causing it to lose its spiritual and emotional essence. This distortion not only impacts the quality of the couple's relationship but also leads to psychological pressure, anxiety, and an imbalanced relationship from the very beginning of the marriage. In many cases, both men and women become trapped in a materialistic mindset that undermines the values of humanity and genuine love.

Humanistic psychology offers an approach that focuses on self-awareness, freedom of choice, and personal growth. Therefore, this approach encourages the *mahar* to be understood in a personal and authentic way, based on spiritual values, simplicity, and respect for the partner as a whole individual. The *mahar* should be a symbol of honor, not a burden; an expression of love, not a social demand.

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