

REPRESENTATION OF INDIAN TRADITION AND PATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN TAGORE'S "PUNISHMENT"

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ABSTRACT

In this study an investigation has been made to show how Rabindranath Tagore has represented the tradition of India and the dominance of patriarchy in his short story "Punishment". The author does so smoothly through his depiction of the wretched condition of the women during pre-independent India. What is commonly found in the stories of Tagore is basically the life sketch of the common people and "Punishment" is not exceptional. However, unlike the novels and poetry where the plot includes romantic themes, the author's short stories in general and "Punishment" in particular focuses on the sufferings of the margin and downtrodden.

In the concerned story, Tagore has highlighted the pitiful condition of women, who are victims of the patriarchal system ages after ages. Through the major female characters of the story, the writer has shown both—the tradition of India as reflected through their behaviour and activities of day to day life; and how they succumb to the injustice and submit themselves in front of the male members of their family. The story imparts a strong message to the readers that there should be an end to the uneven social structure and women should be readily given their right to live a better life maintaining an identity of their own.

KEYWORDS: Tradition, Patriarchy, Pre-Independent, Margin, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Recently, Indian Writing in English has established its reputation globally with renowned authors like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Aravind Adiga and many other contemporary writers. However, if the history of Indian Writing in English is traced, it would be found that the writers belonging to the pre-independent period such as Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan who had built up the platform and produced quality literature should be given due credit. In this study an attempt has been made to identify and compare the forces of oppression that existed in a gendered society in pre-independent India with reference to Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Punishment".

A critical analysis of the text reveals the fact that the female members of a family are victims of male-dominated society in one way or the other. "More often than not, only women have to bear the brunt of shame. Since time immemorial, shame in the form of moral sanction has been an effective tool that the patriarchal society uses to control women, to limit their autonomy, their mobility and their choices" (Nayak, *The Hindu* 12). Though there is a major shift in the themes in the postcolonial fiction where the female characters are presented as self-awakening who do not submit themselves meekly to the patriarchal society, the reverse is a stark reality so far as the reflection of this aspect in literature during the colonial rule in India is concerned.

Short story as a literary form has its strong hold since the time immemorial. Amid the busy schedule, a reader can easily pick up a short story and go through at one sitting or two. And perhaps it is one of the major reasons behind the popularity of this form of literature in all time. However, a short story is not the substitute for a novel. There are some common and many uncommon factors behind the recognition of the two different forms of literature.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) who is popularly known as one of the leading creative artist worldwide has great contribution in all forms of literature—a poet, novelist, short story writer, an essayist, playwright, painter and above all a song composer. He was the first Indian who received the Noble Prize for literature in 1913. In addition to the other literary forms, the author had given special attention to short story and written more than ninety stories of various themes. However, an emphasis will be given on one of Tagore’s short story “Punishment”.

A critical investigation of women’s status during the colonial power in India as depicted in Rabindranath Tagore’s “Punishment” clearly reflects the isolation of women from the main stream society. “The relationship between men and women has often being [been] constructed as that of manipulation of power rather than of equality” (Rawat, Urmil and Veenu Upal 38). In this story Tagore has described the death of Radha at the hand of her husband; and subsequently, the meek submission of her sister-in-law Chandara to the police for the same crime (as the murder), is an ideal example of patriarchal dominance. In fact Chandara is innocent. Her innocence and obedience together lead Chandara to face “the same of the noose” (Tagore, “Punishment” 23-24) at last.

A close study of the short story “Punishment” shows that the women characters depicted in it are traditionalists. The major women characters like Radha and Chandara, the wives of Dukhiram Rui and Chiddam Rui respectively follow a set pattern of life in the male dominated society. Though these women quarrel with one another very often but they rely on the decisions of their husbands in any and every matter.

Like the traditionalists women characters Bimala (as portrayed in the initial part of the novel) and Rukmani in Tagore’s *The Home and the World* and Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* respectively, the female characters in the “Punishment” are also portrayed in similar manner. Bimala, follows the norms of the Hindu tradition immediately after her marriage with Nikhil (though did not last long) and “would cautiously and silently get up and take the dust of my husband’s feet without waking him” (Tagore, *Home and the World* 3). Rukmani, on the other hand, used to visit the temple every time she visited her mother’s house “imploring for help” (Markandaya, 18) from God. Similarly, Indian traditional values are reflected through the deeds of Radha and Chandara in “Punishment”. Side by side the author has emphasised on the fact as to how Indian women who stick to the traditional values of the country are the victim of exploitation in the patriarchal society especially through Chandara and Radha.

The whole story revolves around these two female characters and their husbands. Following the traditional pattern, the duo usually waits anxiously for their husbands till they return from work every day before the sun set. Until the day of Radha’s death, it seemed to the local people that the family consisting of Dukhiram Rui, Chiddam Rui and their wives are leading a happy life despite the frequent quarrel between the two women. Though clouds of unhappiness and gloom hover around the rest of the family members on that particular day, a conspiracy is hatched by the murder’s brother behind the veil.

The tears in the eyes of Dukhiram Rui after his wife’s death, in fact, are crocodile tears. Dukhiram, who “had been sitting like a statue for a long time ... bursts into tears like a helpless child” (Tagore, “Punishment” 15) as soon

as he hears the voice of Ramlochan Chakraborty during the latter's visit to the former's house. Moreover, his lack of care and sympathy for Radha, is clearly evident from the act of killing his wife merely for the latter's failure to give 'food' to the former.

After a whole day of toil and humiliation, to return—raging with hunger—to a dark, joyless, foodless house ... 'What?' he roared, like a furious tiger, and then, without thinking, plunged his knife into her head Radha collapsed into her sister-in-law's lap, and in minutes she was dead. (Tagore, "Punishment" 14)

The male members, here Dukhiram Rui and his brother want their wives to remain at home and look after the household work like the conformists and traditionalists. The two brothers consider themselves as the bread earners of the family. Consequently, they stick to their convictions and do their work accordingly. However irony lies in the fact that despite his failure to 'give' his wife "anything to cook" (Tagore, "Punishment" 14), Dukhiram expected prepared food from her and 'plunged his knife into her head' for not getting the same.

What surprises the readers most is the event that follows Radha's death. Chidam Rui, the other male member of the Rui family is a hypocrite. His gloomy and sorrowful frame of mind as reflected in front of Ramlochan is merely a pretention to show the latter how concerned the former is about Radha whose death is a great loss to the Rui Family. His hypocritical nature is reflected through his deeds guided by deceitful thought as the plot of the story progresses: "Chidam, all this time, had been unable to think what to do. Various impossible stories occurred to him. All he had decided was that later that night he would move the body somewhere" (Tagore, "Punishment" 15).

Being feminine gender, Chandara who is hardly 'eighteen' years old becomes the victim of the plot of her husband Chidam Rui. The opinion of Chidam about the women is shocking. He considers women as weaker sex in comparison to men and must live a subdued life. According to him one can marry another woman if his wife dies but once a brother is lost would be lost forever. That's why Chidam decides to save his brother Dukhiram Rui, and to do so Chidam puts the blame of murder of Radha on his wife. Ramlochan is the first man of the village who comes to know first about the murder of Radha, other than the family members. But the real mystery remained under the ashes of Chidam's intrigue. Unexpected entry of Chakraborty confuses Chidam so much that the latter fails to understand what to do at that very moment.

Finding no way out Chidam says to Ramlochan that his wife Chandara has killed Radha while the two were quarrelling with one another: "In their quarrel, *Chotobau* stuck at *Barobau's* head with a farm-knife" (Tagore, "Punishment" 15). Being 'trapped' in such a circumstance, Ramlochan pronounces the name of Hindu God: "*Ram, Ram*" (16) is also the part of Indian culture and tradition. Chidam greets/addresses Ramlochan as "*Thakur*", while the former was pretending in front of the latter requesting him for some advice to "save my wife" (16) too comes under Indian tradition

In fact, Chidam is adamant about his decision and "stick to the path he had chalked out for himself" (17). Such decision of Chidam to push his own wife at the periphery is enough to ruin the healthy environment of Rui family in general and the life of Chandara in particular:

Chidam asked Chandara to take the blame on to herself. She was dumbfounded. He reassured her.: 'Don't worry—if you do what I tell you, you'll be quite safe.' But whatever his words, his throat was dry and his face was pale. (Tagore, "Punishment" 17).

Chidam's guilt is indicated through the words 'dry' and 'pale' in the above quoted passage. "Although he was not unresponsive to the beauty of other women in the village, and was keen to make himself charming in their eyes, his real love was for his young wife" (Tagore, "Punishment" 18). This statement of the author about Chidam seems ironic. Sometimes he "used work as an excuse" for travelling distance places and hardly brings any earnings home. It doesn't matter to him and doesn't expect any query by his wife. However, he cautions Chandara in threatening tone saying that:

If I ever hear that you've been to the *ghat* on your own, I'll break every bone in your body ... Chidam sprang at her, grabbed her by the hair, dragged her back to the room and locked her in.
(Tagore, "Punishment" 19)

Chandra is well aware of the tradition and patriarchal set up of the then Indian society very well. That's why she doesn't make any effort to counter argue with her husband when the later asks the former to acknowledge the murder. Contrarily, she surrenders herself modestly in front of her husband. The author has described and portrayed Chandara's helplessness and innocent appearance as reflected through her body gesture very strikingly through the following lines: "Chandara stared at him, stunned; her black eyes burnt him like fire. Then she slowly shrank from him, as if to escape his devilish clutches. She turned her heart and soul quite away" (Tagore, "Punishment" 19). While Dhukiram is contented with and relied on what his younger brother Chidam is doing, the latter is preparing the blueprint to save the former. To do so Chidam convinces Ramlochan first that his wife Chandara is responsible for the murder of Radha. Consequently, taking help from Ramlochan, Chidam 'instructed' Chandara to say: "The elder wife was about to attack me with the vegetable-slicer. I picked up a farm-knife to stop her, and it somehow cut into her" (20).

Chandara, on the other hand, is not only shocked by her husband's activities but also fed up. During the time of investigation, Chandara confesses that "I killed her" (Tagore, "Punishment" 20). Her acceptance of the crime and the manner of answering the several questions asked by the police inspector surprises everybody around her. She remains adamant to her words of acceptance of the murder and "seemed absolutely bent on going to the gallows" (21). Pointing at her husband, she categorically says that: "I shall give my youth to the gallows instead of you. My final ties in this life will be with them" (21). She sticks to her confession even in front of the Deputy Magistrate in the court. The rigidity of her behaviour in this regard generates some sympathy but lately in her husband's mind, who, "broke down completely" while the latter was called to the witness-box. But it is in vain. His statement in favour of Chandara in front of the Deputy Magistrate that "I swear to you, sir, my wife is innocent" (21) hardly brings any change in Chandara's decision. Dukhiram Rui too comes in her rescue at last in the court. He tries to convince the Magistrate that he is guilty of the murder and not Chandara but it is too late. It seems to the judges that the two brothers are trying to save her. Moreover, as Chandara repeats the same statements time and again from the time of police investigation, the judge declares her as murder and pronounces capital punishment of death penalty:

In goal, just before the hanging, a kindly Civil Surgeon asked Chandara, 'Do you want to see anyone?'
'I'd like to see my mother,' she replied.
'Shall I call your husband?' asked the doctor. 'He wants to see you.'
'Not him,' said Chandara. (Tagore, "Punishment" 24)

The above discussion clearly shows the propagation of Indian tradition and the pitiful plight of the women during the pre-independent India. Basically, the story focuses on the hegemonization of the margin through the dominance of one

powerful class over the other that is weaker one. More precisely, it is the control of the men over the women. However, the feminist movement launched during the latter half of the twentieth century influenced literature greatly. As a result a gradual change in the status of women is witnessed with the passage of time.

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