

**THE SUBALTERN IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORY,
*PUNISHMENT***

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Abstract

Poet, philosopher, artist, playwright, composer and novelist, India's first Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore is a versatile genius. While his poetry catches the rhythm of romanticism, his prose works project, however, a different Tagore—an exceptional realist who plumbs to the bottom of the colonial Indian society and focusses on subordination, abject deprivation and poverty of the less disadvantaged humanity. Sometimes regarded as an elitist who could not grasp the plight of the underclass, Tagore proves his critics wrong in his representation of the rural poor in some of his short stories. One such story is Punishment, set in the rural Bengal that was mostly inhabited by the poor who were victims of colonial injustice, landlordism, and the old but deeply ingrained ideologies of patriarchy, caste and gender.

Keywords: Subordination; abject deprivation; colonial injustice; landlordism; ideologies of patriarchy, caste and gender.

In this paper, I intend to relate Tagore's fictional art with the postcolonial notion of the Subaltern. The word 'subaltern' which means 'of inferior rank (quoted in Guha vii)' is used here as a concept referring to groups in society subjected to the hegemony of the dominant ruling classes. Following Ranajit Guha, I take it as "the general attribute of subordination ... expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way (Guha vii)." In Tagore's short stories the Subaltern speak, suffer, rebel and challenge the established norms of society. I restrict my discussion mainly on Tagore's two short stories—"Punishment" and "The Postmaster".

Kalpana Bardhan, who compiled an anthology on Bengali short stories addressing the issues of the oppressed, states of Tagore's stories:

The oppressor is ultimately some aspect of the cultural ideology and the social situation in which both men and women feel themselves trapped because of some socially bred dysfunction of the individual will and psyche. The tragedy lies in the distortion that their personalities and relationships suffer under the tyranny of social mores and beliefs, in the havoc that ingrained ideas can play on human mind and behaviour. The climax comes with the realization that habitual notions have led one to blindness, to barriers from more humane choices, ultimately to becoming one's own jailer. It is then too late to change the rules, even though the nature of the problem has been perceived. All that remains is the shattering knowledge that the ideas one has always lived by are wrong, oppressive, and mindless (Bardhan 14-15).

The oppression of the female is seen through male eyes and reflected in male actions and reactions. The importance of this perspective is pivotal in the perpetuation of or the resistance to patriarchal oppression. The failure of the male to live up to his own self in relation to the female, the recognition of his own defeat and degradation in hers, is a potentially powerful basis of transformation for him. We know that this perspective was important in Bengal in the nineteenth-century male-led reform movement.

Tagore's celebrated short story, "Punishment" ("Shasti" in Bengali) underlines the agony of Chandara, a poor village girl who is falsely implicated in the colonial legal nets in order to feed the vested interests of feudalism and patriarchy. "Punishment" was inspired by Tagore's experience of rural Bengal during the decade he spent there as manager of the family estates in Shelidah. Tagore's sensitive portrayal of the complex relationships among the members of the low-caste Rui family and between them and the upper-class rural society that exploits them suggests both realism and a sense of tragedy. Tagore shows here how economic, social, and patriarchal oppressions are intrinsically linked and of the ability of the oppressed to resist even the most powerful forms of oppression. Tagore's real interest in 'Punishment,' is in delineating the psychological ramifications of social and familial relationships.

Chandara represents the power and dignity of the human will in the face of societal degradation. The members of the family are victims of dual forces—the oppressive feudalism imposed by the British colonialism through the indigenous elite class and the discriminatory ideologies of patriarchy. A much anthologized work, it was set in a rural village. It describes the oppression of women through the tragedy of the low-caste Rui family. The story is about two brothers, Dukhram Rui and Chidam Rui and their wives, Radha and Chandara. The brothers are landless labourers, and the four, along with Radha's baby son, share a house as subtenants of the village know-all about legal matters, Ramlochan Chakrabarty. The layering of tenancy, fragmentation of landholdings and landlessness were endemic in rural life in Colonial India, and in Bengal in particular became progressively worse from the Permanent Settlement of 1793 onwards, as detailed in a report on the progress of land reforms in Bengal following Independence.

Romesh Chunder Dutt, writing in 1874 about the peasantry of Bengal, said 'Zemindars still possess to an indefinite extent the power to oppress, harass and ruin their ryots (peasants) in a variety of ways against which the law offers no redress, and that therefore in most places ryots are still held in a sort of moral servitude, and comply, without thinking of resistance, with the most unjust demands and orders of their masters ... [and] make it simply impossible for ryots to

save anything, or to learn to be prudent, provident, thinking beings, or better their condition(Dutt x.)

Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui lived together in the same house. Their wives were always quarreling. One day both brothers went to work with their farm knives at the Zamindar's house, while their wives were quarreling. A bailiff took them forcibly to work on the office roof that was leaking in places. They worked whole day and couldn't return for lunch. They were neither paid their usual wages and were also insulted. Ranajit Guha describes how forced labour was a feature of rural life in Colonial India. British colonialism seemed to "legitimize all exercises of coercive authority by the dominant over the subordinate in every walk of life...Every landlord could indeed play "maharaj" to his tenants in extracting beggar from them or setting his lathi-wielding myrmidons on them if they refused to oblige" (Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* 29-30).

On returning in the evening Dukhiram exploded with rage on not finding food to eat. Ranajit Guha describes how forced labour was a feature of rural life in Colonial India. He took his farm knife and struck his wife on the head. She collapsed into Chandara's (her sister-in-law) lap and expired. Chandara's clothes were wet with blood. Dukhiram sat down in grief. Chandara screamed but Chidam pressed her mouth with his hand. Outside no one knew what had happened in the house.

This brutal act of homicide committed by the illiterate poor, Dukhiram is certainly fuelled by his angst against the Zamindari system that forced him to work without pay in inclement weather throughout the day and the slightest provocation on the part of his wife led him to murder her. The Subaltern anger is exacerbated by poverty and hunger. Of course, this anger is misdirected and miscarried. Instead of resisting the invincible state power, it is foolishly directed towards the powerless woman-Radha who spends the day attending to his starved little child and who taunts Dukhiram's male ego when, returning home, he asks for food- "Where is the food? Did thou make provision for it before leaving the house? Shall I earn for the family" (Tagore, *Galpaguchha* 155)? Here there is a hint at earning by selling her body-a humiliation on the part of Dukhiram who finds it unbearable.

In the evening Ramlochan Chakraborty who also happened to be the village's chief legal advisor came to collect the rent from Dukhiram. As he came Dukhiram burst into tears. Chidam quickly told him that both the women had a fight and the younger one killed the elder sister-in-law. He asked Ramlochan how he could save his wife. Ramlochan suggested that he should put the blame on his brother's head. But Chidam said, "Thakur, if I lose my wife I can get another, but where shall I get another brother if Dukhiram is hanged (Tagore, *Galpaguchha* 156)? Finding some rationale in Chidam's speech, Ramlochan said that he should go to the police and tell the truth. This question justifies the male dominated ideology and rejects outright the importance of Chandara in Chidam's life.

On hearing such lies Chandara was shocked as she loved her husband. She stared at him in disbelief. Chidam told her to say that the elder wife was about to attack her with the vegetable slicker. So she picked up the farm knife to protect herself and it hurt her head. The police came to investigate. Chandara told them that she had killed the elder wife as she couldn't stand her anymore. She also told them that she didn't have any quarrel. She was determined to die rather than live with her husband. The innocent village wife was arrested and taken through streets and watched by her friends and companion. Chandara confessed to the Deputy Magistrate that she had committed the sin.

When she was told that her punishment would be death by hanging, she prayed for the penalty without delay. She said that she loved her husband like mad person and her husband also loves her. Now Chidam cried and said he had killed his sister- in- law as she didn't give him food. Dukhiram said he was the killer. But the judge said that both the brothers were trying to save the accused woman. Chandara is a proud, beautiful woman, "buxom, well-rounded, compact and sturdy (157)". To help his brother, Chidam falsely informs the police that his wife struck her sister-in-law with the farm-knife.

Chandara takes the blame on to herself. In her thoughts, Chandara was saying to her husband, "I shall give my youth to the gallows instead of you. My final ties in this life will be with them (159)". Afterwards both Chidam and Dukhiram try to confess that they were guilty but Chandara is convicted.

In jail Chandara was asked if she wanted to see anyone, she replied that she would like to see her mother. Just before the hanging, the doctor says that her husband wants to see her. Chandara exclaimed, "Death (161)!" The last word, which is a literal rendering of the Bengali interjection 'Maran!' connotes a variety of complex and untranslatable implications: anger, exasperation, hatred, but also a suppressed eroticism. The story focuses on the outraged young woman and the devastated husband who are both the victims of the oppressive social hierarchy.

Tagore's Subalterns don't beg for affection. They crave for love only from those they love .When they feel rejected, they suffer, revolt and sometimes embraces death, as does Chandara in "Punishment". In Tagore's short stories the Subaltern speak, suffer, rebel and challenge the established norms of society.

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