TAGORE'S *PUNISHMENT*: AN IRONIC STUDY OF TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS, AND ULTIMATE VINDICATION

DR. SUMITA ROY

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

Tagore's *Punishment*: An Ironic Study of Trials, Tribulations, and Ultimate Vindication

Abstract

The late nineteenth century in colonial Bengal, India, was a time of intense activity due to the interplay of rapidly changing social, cultural, political and economic values. Western notions and ideas of egalitarianism and democracy began to profoundly influence and change the inherently feudal socio-economic-cultural framework that characterized much of colonial India. While such changes directly impacted upon the birth of nascent nationalism and growth of a political identity that eventually led to India's emancipation from British rule in 1947, they also affected literature and society.

Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Saratchandra Chatterjee, and others, through their literary creations explored among other topics, issues such as women's emancipation in a society that awarded minimal rights to women. They delineated iconoclastic female characters who challenged the traditional norms that governed the social, economic and cultural status of women in rural Bengal.

This paper will demonstrate that against the backdrop of such socio-cultural upheavals, the central protagonist Chandara, in Tagore's short story *Punishment*, is one such embodiment of a burgeoning gender identity that had been hitherto faceless. The beautiful young wife of a poor, unskilled farm laborer in rural Bengal, Chandara belongs to one of the lower grids at the intersection of gender, social, and caste hierarchies in the Indian society. Shorn of any economic or political rights, she executes a scathing denunciation of an androcentric universe through the exercise of "free will" by choosing to go to the gallows for a crime she did not commit. In one ironic stroke, Tagore celebrates her individuality which was denied to her in life that is at once powerful and mute.

Historical, Socio-Cultural, Political Factors

The late nineteenth century in colonial Bengal, India, was a time of intense activity due to the interplay of rapidly changing social, cultural, political and economic values. The cumulative effects of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century, the Bengal famine in 1943, and Partition of Bengal in 1947 created an era of change, strife, and emancipation.

Western notions and ideas of egalitarianism and democracy began to profoundly influence and change the inherently feudal socio-economic-cultural framework that characterized much of colonial India. While such changes directly impacted upon the birth of nascent nationalism and growth of a political identity that eventually led to India's emancipation from British rule in 1947, they also affected literature, languages, and society. The colonial literature that was generated during this period, however, raised some interesting points. It embodied the inherent conflict between the indigenous and mainstream colonial cultures and created a "crisis in cultural identity" (Hogan, 2004; Bardhan, 1990). Later, in *Punishment*, we will see how Tagore uses it to highlight some of the extraneous features that perhaps ought to be rejected from his society.

Literature and Society

While writers such as Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and Bankimchandra Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) worked towards laying the foundations for the emergence of modern Bengali secular writing from its Brahmanic Sanskrit literary and medieval devotional lyrical roots in the early part of the nineteenth century, writers such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Saratchandra Chatterjee (1849-1917), and others, through their literary creations explored among other topics, issues such as women's emancipation in a society that awarded minimal rights to women. They used modern Bengali idiom to narrate the tales, trials and tribulations of ordinary people through essays and fiction. Most typically, they gave voice to the narratives of the various forms of oppression due to gender, caste, class, and tribal ethnicity factors in society. Literature becomes a tool for documenting social reality. As Bardhan (1990) points out in *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*

> "In a society characterized not only by hierarchical structures of privilege and oppression but also increasingly by class differentiation and class conflict, literature reflects and grapples with the tensions between these structures… Both oppression and the resistance of the oppressed are structured by gender, class, caste, and ethnicity, usually in

> combination. If we want to understand the modes of oppression and the modes of resistance and rebellion in relation to each other, then literature is a good place to look…" (p. 3).

Collectively, these writers chronicled the oppression of women, peasants, landless peasants, low-caste marginalized groups and the manner in which they dealt with it through "action, silence, suffering or rebellion" (Bardhan, 1990). They delineated iconoclastic female characters who challenged the traditional norms that governed the social, economic and cultural status of women in rural Bengal.

Tagore's "Punishment"

While Tagore's contribution to Indian literature, music, art, culture, and philosophy is profound, the short story as a genre in Bengali literature, achieved perfection in his hands. He used it to raise social questions, paint Bengali women as stronger than men, and provide a "voice to silent isolation" (Lago, 1977). In *Punishment* (1893) he does all of these and more. Against the backdrop of such socio-cultural upheavals as briefly described, the central protagonist Chandara, is one such embodiment of a burgeoning gender identity that had been hitherto faceless.

The beautiful young wife of a poor, unskilled farm laborer in rural Bengal, Chandara belongs to one of the lower grids at the intersection of gender, social, and caste hierarchies in the Indian society. She belongs to the *kuri* caste, which was a low-caste originally designated to catch birds, but by the nineteenth century had evolved themselves in the caste hierarchy to be "general laborers" (Radice, 2002). Tagore describes her as "no more than seventeen or eighteen," a "well-rounded, buxom, and sturdy" girl who "was like a brand-new boat: neat and shapely, gliding with ease, not a loose joint anywhere" (Tagore, p. 1695). She was bright and lively with "deep black eyes" who was "amused and intrigued'' by everything around her. She had left her "childhood dolls" in her father's house at a very young age to be married to Chidam, the second

of the Rui brothers and lived in a joint household occupied by the elder brother Dukhiram and his wife Radha.

While Chandara's father had died peacefully on the assumption that he had "made proper arrangements for his daughter's future" in initiating and arranging her marriage to Chidam, Chandara, with little education and fewer professional skills, can be viewed as a victim of a society that due to a combination of historical, caste, class and gender factors gave her little choice. Deprived of education due to her gender, class and caste, girls like Chandara in the feudal socio-economic structure in colonial Bengal had no other option than to go through a caste-based marriage arranged by her society. There is no social upliftment – rather a continuation of what her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had done before.

In compliance with the norms of a patriarchal society, Chandara is wrenched from her natal home and expected to live and abide by the rules of her husband's extended family. The "pain" and "vulnerability" in a young girl who is transplanted in alien surroundings and deprived of any filial love and support before her "conjugal love has solidified'' is well-documented and has formed the substance of female folklore in Bengal (Bardhan, 1990). The concept of 'ideal womanhood" in the Hindu Indian culture derives from the *Mahabharata* that prescribed appropriate behavior of women in Bengal. A married woman was expected to follow the tenets of *Stridharma* ("woman's duty") as "fidelity and devotion in her service to her husband and his family" and combine within herself the duties of *Sahadharma* ("duties in partnership with her husband") and *Grihini* ("duties as a housewife in assisting her husband in performing the male functions of *Dharma, Artha* in earning livelihood, and *Kama* in fulfilling conjugal duties") (Mathew, 2001).

Accordingly, we see Chandara conducting her wifely duties by completing her household chores which included fetching water from the river, cleaning house and clothes, and assisting her sister-in-law in cooking. In the absence of a mother-in-law, the ruling matriarch in the Rui household is Radha, Dukhiram's wife. Tagore describes Radha as Chandara's "exact" antithesis: She is "unkempt", "sloppy", "slovenly" and is "disorganized in her dress, housework, and the care of her child. She never had any proper work in hand, yet never seemed to have time for anything," and "at the mildest barb "would rage and stamp and let fly" at Radha (Tagore, p. 1695). In fact, the relationship between the two women is so disharmonious that that their neighbors considered Radha and Chandara's "shrill screams" and constant "uproar" as "other customary, natural sounds…not a violation of Nature's rules." When goaded by Radha's insinuations that Chandara is flighty: "That girl runs before the storm. How can I restrain her? Who knows what ruin she will bring?," Chidam exercises his patriarchal rights by threatening to break "every bone" in her body, dragging her by the hair, and locking her up in her room. The independent Chandara flees to her uncle three miles away and has to be brought back after much persuasion. Chidam, fit and shapely like his wife, was also young and carefree. He loved his wife, but was never sure of her: "... his real love was for his young wife. They quarreled sometimes, but there was mutual respect too: neither could defeat the other… She was as hard to restrain… as to hold a handful of mercury; she always slipped through his fingers" (Tagore, p. 1696). The need to control was mutual as Chandara, too, felt that "if she didn't bind him tightly to her she might one day lose him." In some ways, while Chidam and Chandara and their fledgling love can be seen as victims of social, cultural and economic oppression, Chandara's spatial autonomy is significantly diminished by the rules of *Stridharma*. In other words, while Chidam can lock his wife up, Chandara cannot and may not lock her man in.

In the primarily agrarian feudal structure that was prevalent in colonial rural Bengal, men like Dukhiram and Chidam exercised the least power in society. They were stigmatized by their low-caste, low-class, and illiteracy. They were landless peasants who worked as farm-laborers in other people's lands. They were paid at less than the minimum wage rate, and due to the vagaries of nature such as drought, flood, and famine, their earnings fluctuated considerably. As we see in *Punishment*, Dukhiram and Chidam work grueling hours from morning to evening in the fields and have to complete additional odd jobs such as fixing leaky roofs at no pay in order to make up for their missed rent. The absentee landlord or the *Zamindar* who often lived in the city hired a bevy of middlemen in the form of accountants, business managers, strongmen, and quasi-legal figures such as Ramlochan to extract rent and taxes from the peasants. In one deft stroke, Tagore paints the plight of Dukhiram and Chidam against social, economic, patriarchal oppression:

> "That day Dukhiram and Chidam had been working near the zamindar's office. On a sandbank opposite, paddy had ripened. The paddy needed to be cut before the sandbank was washed away, but the village people were busy either in their own fields or in cutting jute: so a messenger came from the office and forcibly engaged the two brothers. As the office roof was leaking in places, they also had to mend that…They couldn't come home for lunch; they just had a snack from office. At times they were soaked by the rain; they were not paid normal labourer's wages…they were paid mainly in insults and sneers." (Tagore, p. 1693)

Helpless and mute, the only power Dukhiram and Chidam can exercise in their lives is their "marital power over their wives" (Bardhan, 1990). Thus, when the brothers return home at the end of yet another miserable day full of "toil and humiliation" and "raging with hunger to a dark, joyless, foodless house," Radha's sarcastic jibe "Where is there food? Did you give me anything to cook? Must I earn money myself to buy it?" becomes "suddenly unbearable" for Dukhiram and he plunges "his knife into her head." Tellingly, Radha collapses into Chandara's lap and "in minutes she was dead." Unknowingly, and a few minutes later, Ramlochan walks into this frozen tableau of horror and shock to collect his rent from Dukhiram, and in response to his query as to

why Dukhiram was sobbing, Tagore's portrayal of a simple, rural man's mind under extreme stress when torn between filial duty and conjugal love is both tragic and ironic as is evident from Chidam's terrible reply: "In their quarrel, *Chotobau* struck at *Borobau's* head with a farm-knife…. When immediate danger threatens, it is hard to think of other dangers. Chidam's only thought was to escape from the terrible truth- he forgot that a lie can be even more terrible…" (Tagore, p. 1694).

As subsequent events unfold, we see Chidam and Ramlochan negotiate on various versions of the truth in order to save Chandara's life before the police arrive; however, as far as Chandara is concerned the "terrible lie" becomes the truth. Chidam's agonized comment "*Thakur*, if I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him?" damns him forever in Chandara's eyes, and when he tries to coach her into confessing her non-existent crime as an act of self-defense, she stared at him, stunned, and "… her black eyes burnt him like fire. Then she shrank back, as if to escape his devilish clutches. She turned her heart and soul away from him" (Tagore, p. 1696). Chidam's desperate lie can be interpreted at one level as an attempt simply to save his brother, Dukhiram, and send Chandara callously to hang, and at another as a tragedy of disempowered men and women who chafe against economic exploitation and the "oppressive hold of social mores" that makes as Bardhan poignantly puts it "lips speak what the heart does not mean" (1990). But, more importantly, Chidam as the patriarch (especially as his older brother Dukhiram had been rendered ineffectual in the aftermath of the tragedy), was relying on the time-worn tradition of *Stridharma* where Chandara as the "virtuous wife" (Hogan, 2000) was expected to support and follow his lead come what may. While an incorporation of the western notion of egalitarianism was entirely welcome and necessary into the indigenous

Indian culture, it went directly against the tenets of the indigenous caste structure. The *acar* and *sastra* (customs and traditions of ordinary life) associated with *Dharma* are also caste-related (Hogan, 2000). Tagore allows Chandara to be the ideal wife up to a point – insofar as to highlight the conflict and inconsistencies of colonial India.

In the trial and police questionings that follow, Chidam and Dukhiram make several attempts to confess and present the truth, two barristers do "their utmost to save [Chandara] from the death sentence, but in the end were defeated by her." The power, beauty, and stature of Tagore's women lie in their stubborn intransigence where they defy traditional norms and eke out a path for themselves. While the male protagonists of the story lose credibility by narrating five different versions of the truth, Chandara, by steadfastly saying "Yes, I killed her" transforms Chidam's terrible lie into the truth.

> "Such an obstinate girl was never seen! She seemed absolutely bent on going to the gallows; nothing would stop her. Such fierce, passionate pride! 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." (Tagore, p. 1697)

Head held high, the eighteen-year old refuses to see her repentant husband and summons the strength to walk up to the gallows for a crime she did not commit. By refusing to acknowledge the fact that she did not kill Radha, Chandara chooses to exercise her free will and transcends the lowly status that her androcentric universe had awarded her. Shorn of any political and economic rights, she emerges triumphant in death as she executes a scathing denunciation of the oppressive powers that belittled her worth and love. In choosing to tread an untrodden path, Chandara, like other "fallible heroines" of Tagore courts exile and ridicule and becomes an "unconscious avatar" who " signal[s] a developing rift within the colonial Indian context between inherited assumptions and competing feminist ideologies" (Mathew, 2001). Chandara's temporal punishment in life ironically becomes the eternal hangman's noose that dangles around the neck

of an oppressive, patriarchal, and exploitative system that spawned her and that she rejects. In one ironic stroke, Tagore celebrates her individuality which was denied to her in life that is at once powerful and mute.

References

Bardhan, Kalpana. *Of women, outcastes, peasants, and rebels: a selection of Bengali short stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 330 p.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Colonialism and cultural identity: crises of tradition in the anglophone literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* Albany: State University of New York Press. 2000. 353 p.

———. *Empire and poetic voice: cognitive and cultural studies of literary tradition and colonialism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. 289 p.

Lago, Mary. *Rabindranath Tagore*. Twayne Publishers. 1976. 176 p.

Mathew, Mary. "Rabindranath Tagore, Feminism and Cross-Cultural (Re)visions" in *Modernity in East-West Literary Criticisms*, edited by Y. Hakutani Fairleigh Dickinson University Press .2001. p. 87-98.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Punishment* (1893). In *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. F. W.W. Norton Company. Translated by W. Radice. 2002. p. 1693-99