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ENG 202

04/30/2023

How does Tagore treat class in “Punishment” and in “Kabuliwala”?

Social status can vary within society, it can go from the mostly lowly person to someone who is quite wealthy. Social class can even demonstrate how a person may treat other people. Rabindranath Tagore showed a couple of differences and similarities in “Punishment” and “Kabuliwala” pertaining to how classes treated one another. One of the differences that can be seen between the stories is the way the upper class viewed social status in others. Another difference is the chance of freedom the lower class was given by the upper class. A similarity that the stories both shared was the value of time and effort they were given.

Firstly, when looking at both texts there is a difference the way Tagore portrays each of the characters and how they deal with people in different class. In “Punishment” we can see that Chandara at this point in the story she is facing a trial. Chandara is sticking to her story that she is guilty of killing Radha. Her husband tries to defend her but, in the process fails. Tagore makes an emphasis how the magistrate ignored Chidam’s story and only focused on the more educated landlord. Tagore writes, “The magistrate sternly told him to control himself, and began to question him. Bit by bit the true story came out. The magistrate did not believe him, because the chief, most trustworthy, most educated witness—Ramlochan Chakravarti...” (Tagore 646). Tagore bring us to the fact that magistrate only wanted to focus on what the landlord, Ramlochan wanted to say despite that Chidam was saying that his wife was innocent. He makes a point that

those who were of higher education would be given more attention over a poor subtenant. Tagore shows that those who were poor didn't have a voice to be heard and were basically brushed off. On the other hand, in "Kabuliwala" there's a difference and how he's viewed by the family. Kabuliwala makes an effort trying to sell fruits on the streets. Many might not find this amusing and would not like to be pestered. In the case of the narrator's wife, she's not so keen on having Kabuliwala around. Tagore shows that the narrator's wife would rather have her home and family practically live in a bubble. Tagore states the following,

"Hence she could not trust Rahamat the Kabuliwala either. She told me over and over again to keep a close watch on him. When I tried to laugh off her doubts, she asked me a series of pertinent questions. Are children never kidnapped? Is there or is there not a slave trade in Afghanistan? Is it quite impossible for a hulking big Kabuli to steal a little child?" (Tagore 650)

She viewed him as kidnapper that would bring harm upon Mini. The only way she looked at the Kabuliwala was through fear and as criminal. Tagore demonstrates through this story how a simple man was seen as criminal just because of the way that he looked. There was lack of trust that came from the upper class, which ended up making them look like stuck-up people.

Secondly, we see that both characters in the stories are thrown into jail or go through some sort of justice system. There's a difference between the characters and how their social class gave them their freedom. In "Punishment", Chandara wants to be thrown into jail and be made out guilty for a murder that she never committed. But the magistrate doesn't really fight her about the decision after Chidam and his brother had admitted to the murder. They had given her the choice to be released and she still chose death. The following example demonstrates this point being made,

"After extensive cross-examination of various other witnesses, the judge concluded that the brothers had confessed to the crime in order to save the younger wife from the shame of the noose. But Chandara had, from the police investigation right through to the

sessions trial, said the same thing repeatedly—she had not budged an inch from her story.” (Tagore 647)

They were allowing freedom to be granted to Chandara and they were still willing to give it to her despite her not changing her story. Tagore is showing that the magistrate was willing to grant death to a person that did not commit murder. Death was allowed even if the person was not involved in a murder. It was something that the magistrate was okay with. Although, in “Kabuliwala” it shows a different side to how freedom was restricted to a man. Kabuliwala was trying his best throughout his life to provide for what he needed even if it meant that he was going to be separated from his daughter for a while. Tagore writes,

“Partly from the policemen and partly from Rahamat, I learnt that one of our neighbours owed Rahamat money for a Rampuri shawl he had bought. The man had told lies, denied the debt, and started an argument, in the midst of which Rahamat had pulled out a knife and stabbed him. Rahamat was still hurling filthy abuse at the liar when Mini came skipping out of the house with her ‘Kabuliwala, Kabuliwala!’” (Tagore 650)

Even though Kabuliwala was guilty of causing harm on another he was still thrown in jail for it.

There was no evidence to show the neighbor was telling the truth instead because of the state that the Kabuliwala was in he wasn't given a fair trial. His freedom was taken away from him so easily, simply because the wealthier people had the police on their side.

However, after looking the differences in “Punishment” and in “Kabuliwala” there is a similarity that brings these two stories together. Tagore portrays the importance of time and effort in how the upper class treated the lower class. There is an understanding that many of the lower class were paid poorly. The example that can be given is that the brothers worked hard in order to make ends meet. Tagore writes the following, “They couldn't come home for lunch; they just had a snack from the office. At times they were soaked by the rain; they were not paid normal labourers' wages; indeed, they were paid mainly in insults and sneers.” (Tagore 641).

This example shows how the lower class was pushing to survive and provide a home for

themselves. Overall, the main point being made here is that the brothers were not getting a normal wage, but the only thing they received in return were insults. They were seen as someone who was just getting in the way. Additionally, in “Kabuliwala we can see that same problem arise when Kabuliwala makes his way to the narrator’s house. The narrator isn’t too thrilled to see him coming down his street. This is a prime example as to how the upper class valued the lower class. Tagore states, “Now we’ll have another nuisance walking in, sack and all, thought I.” (Tagore 648). The narrator doesn’t seem to have a care for the Kabuliwala. He doesn’t want him anywhere near his family and would rather have him leave. It can be seen that the narrator was disturbed by the Kabuliwala when he was simply just doing his job.

In conclusion, the “Punishment” and “Kabuliwala” by Rabindranath Tagore expressed the treatment that social classes were given. We can see the difference in both stories as how landlord in “Punishment” was treated better than Chidam in the trial, meanwhile Kabuliwala was looked down as a thief. The other difference was that Chandara had the choice to walk away from death, unlike Kabuliwala who had no choice despite not being given a fair trial. But the two stories did show a similarity as to how the upper class viewed them in their value. The upper class didn’t really have a care for them as humans and were seen as a disturbance in their presence.