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Bengali Institution of Marriage

Rabindranath Tagore, in both “Punishment” and in “Kabuliwala” has presented the fates of brides as, at best, bittersweet stories. To understand the Bengali institution of marriage, one must first understand the Bengali culture and society. Bengali society is predominantly patriarchal where women are deprived of many human rights. We find multiple layers of issues and problems of the Bengali tradition within the stories of Tagore. In this paper, we will discuss about the gender inequality and patriarchal domination in Bengali community, the roles expected of married women, the abuse faced by women from their husbands, and how these traditional roles were deeply rooted in their society and problematic to women by exploring through the stories of Tagore in “Punishment” and “Kabuliwala.”

In a traditional Bengali household, “Married women are expected to: stay at home, perform all the home-making chores; and take care of the husband, children, and in-laws. People also believe that the husband should be the guardian/head of the family, and that the wife should obey her husband (Karim et al.)” Bengalis are also predominantly rural and agricultural in nature (*Bengalis*). We find these traditional roles portrayed in the characters of “Punishment,” by Tagore. Dukhiram and Chidam are brothers who are farmers, living in the same household along with their wives and children. While both the brothers worked for *Jamindar*, the landlord, on a minimum wage, the wives, Radha and Chandara stayed home as home-makers which left both of them with nothing much to do but argue and fight with each other on almost daily basis. It was

also socially acceptable and norm that the in-laws argued so often. Radha, the elder wife, was suddenly plunged by knife into her head by her husband Dukhiram upon simply not providing the food to her husband when he asked for it. It was expected duty of Radha to cook a proper meal for her husband by the time he arrives back home. The “mistake” Radha did was firstly, not having the food readily available upon her husband’s demand, and secondly, to speak back to her husband.

“Right to speech,” is a basic human right but that is non-existent to the women of Bengali background. They are to always listen and do as the men tell them to do. “Speaking back,” to your husband is considered rude and “out-of-character” or “characterless women.” It also means that the wife is not obey her husband. She expected to simply follow or do whatever she is asked of by without questioning back. Bengali community is a predominantly patriarchal society. “The culture of wife abuse is deeply rooted within the traditions of a patriarchal society. According to a proposition of the patriarchy theory, wife abuse is a symptom of a patriarchal society reflected in male authority, leading to the ‘rights’ of a husband to control one’s wife (Karim et al.)” When Radha questioned her husband saying, “Where is there food? Did you give me anything to cook? Must I earn money myself to buy it (Puchner et al.)?” it was an insult to Dukhiram. This also meant that she was not under the control of Dukhiram or “out-of-control” of her husband. She was being her own person by standing up for herself but this is not acceptable in a patriarchal society. Although to her defense i.e., there was no food in the ration for her to cook, the price she paid was her own life for simply speaking back. Did she deserve death in this case at all? This is far more than an abuse.

One of the studies regarding gender inequality was conducted among the Bengali community in Bangladesh. It demonstrated that Bengali women had restricted mobility, they had

limited access to economic resources, employment and higher education; men acted as their guardians and controlled over women's life choices; male dominated social institutions; and a high prevalence of violence against women (Karim et al.). As we read the story, we learn that Chandara was an out-going person who often went to the *ghat* and "parting her veil slightly with her finger (Puchner et al.)." "During the 19th and early 20th century, upper caste Hindu as well as Muslim women were living a life similar to that of prisoners, while living under the veil (*pardah*) (Saqib)." Women cannot lift or part their veil especially when they step outside of their house doors. It is once again considered characterless if women do such things.

Chidam had heard these complains from his sister-in-law, Radha, so, he was already displeased with her to begin with. Additionally, he felt threatened by his wife's youth and her confidence level. He knew that she was not under his control at all. Thus, it was perfect opportunity of Chidam to ask Chandara to take the blame for the killing of Radha. He knew the consequences she would have to face at the end yet, without any hesitation or care he quickly jumped to say that his wife did it when the village leader, Ramlochan asked for the culprit of the killing.

Ramlochan is another example of problematic culture and gender inequality in this society. Ramlochan "*thakur*" is the upper-class man appointed as the elder of the village, whom the villagers highly trust and seek advices from. More importantly, only men are selected as such leaders. This man's witness to the story influences the decision of the court judge, leading the favor against Chandara and having her face her "ill-fate." However, Chandara found freedom in this death sentence as when she was asked who she wanted to see before her sentence as last wish. She replied that she wanted to see her mother, and the jail officer says that her husband wanted to see her but she replies, "To hell with him." One can taste the freedom Chandara must

have felt when being able to say that about her husband, and at the same time can imagine how miserable her life must have been to live with such man who didn't love her, abused her, and used her to save her brother's life.

In "Kabuliwala," Mini is another woman who ever since she was little was constantly reminded by her mother how to act, talk, or conduct herself as a woman. She was a "chatter-box" and her mother would scold her to stop her from talking. Mini had made friends with an elderly man, a vender that would come around to sell grapes. This Afghan man would often talk to mini about how she must never go to her in-laws' house. "Bengali girls are usually taught from childhood about the in-laws' house they must go to." It is like the sole purpose of being born as woman is to be married off to a man's house to be a home-maker for him. Later, the narrator and the Afghan peddler struggle with the eventual loss of Mini as she ages and marries.

In this story, we find different aspect of being born as a woman than that from the, "Punishment." Here, Mini's father and Kabuliwala are both afraid of Mini growing old because it meant that she would be soon married off and away from her father's sight. To Kabuliwala, Mini reminded of her own daughter that he had left back home. In the western world, women have a choice to whether she wants to continue with her career or marry. In the South Asian culture, especially, in Bengali culture, as soon as a girl comes of her age, they are married away to her husband's house where the marriage is arranged for her. She has no choice but to settle down with the man she has never known or met before and to make it worse, live along with the in-laws.

It is traditional in Bengali society to live in a joint, and even extended family. In most cases, women are over-worked by their in-laws if not by her husband. Meanwhile, the men on the other hand, have the choice to choose the woman they want to marry. Although it is still an

arranged marriage, the guy usually pays visit to the girl's house, and he gets to either approve or reject the woman upon their visit. If the guy approves, the woman must marry him.

Another common threat we find in "Kabuliwala" is that both Kabuliwala and Mini's father are afraid of being replaced by their daughter's father-in-law. Once a woman is married off, her duty and obligation are to her husband's family, and not her own family. She is to not only care, cook, look-after, wash the clothes for her husband but also for her in-laws. Most times, women rarely get to visit their parents because she is so busy tending and looking after her husband's family. Is it fair to the women that she does not get to see or be with her own family as she wants? Aren't the women parents not equally important as the men parents? Why can she not have the freedom to choose to pick her own husband? Such is the fate of women even if they are educated and born in "modern family."

From both the stories, it is evident that women in these types of societies are being treated unfairly. Inequality exists for the brides in each story. Bengali institution of marriage is influenced by the culture of patriarchy, inequality, abuse, and there are multiple layers of issues that women have to face in their day-to-day lives because of this. The roles expected to be fulfilled by the married women are deeply problematic as they deprive them from even their basic human rights. Marriage is the inevitable truth of a woman as it is predetermined by the societal norms.

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