

Indian Females' Subjectivity and No Place in Punishment by Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at exploring the different interpretations of short story Punishment under the light of deconstruction theory (Derrida, 1979), unveiling the marital conflicts and female subjectivity. Such conflicts can be traced in all socio-political structures and can be adjusted in different binary oppositions which are put forth by deconstructionists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Jaques Derrida, ultimately leading to a reversal of the hierarchy of these structures. This deconstructive study also explores the social dynamics of life in a patriarchal society along with the evincing tensions ie the story by reversing the patriarchal patterns in which men are given prestigious positions whereas women are suppressive and subordinate. The study discusses how the characters of the story obey these patriarchal blueprints through the study of close accounts of the main characters i.e Chidam, who is aggressive and exploits his powerful position as, a man, and Chandra, who is weak, submissive, and has no place and rights in the society.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Patriarchal structure, Females' Subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction (Derrida, 1968) came as a reaction to fixed structures of Ferdinand de Saussure (1960) which talked about rigidity of patterns. Structuralism (1960) was based on the system of signs and signifiers which were explored in the text having single fixed meanings. Deconstruction (Derrida, 1968) came forth with the stance that it is ostensibly not possible for critics having different mindsets and thinking patterns to land on single fixed meanings and interpretations of any text because meanings are always vague and fragmented. Although deconstruction is criticized for its deficiency to reach clear and fixed outcomes, however, it is a vital instrument to unveil the various dichotomies hidden in the text. (Dabritz, 2018). Deconstruction does not let the critics land on single interpretations with a higher degree of finality (Dabritz, 2018), however, it assists a hermeneutical approach which is very vital to unleashing a plurality of meanings and ambiguities hidden within a text. "It aims to decipher the stable truths of work, employing conventional 'passive' tactics of reading; it seeks to question and subvert such truths in active production of enigmatic undecidable" (Leitch, 1983). According to Cuddon (1991), the ability to subvert the polarity in the binary oppositions

such as male/female, morning/evening, etc. Such binary oppositions tend to present one as privileged or superior with more power whereas the other is always subservient and oppressed. Deconstruction reverts such kinds of binary oppositions by placing the suppressed subject more desirable and attractive position (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2007). The deconstructive approach aims at bringing forth the hidden meanings of the text that are unconscious. These remain unconscious because human language is not capable of having fixed single narratives. It, therefore, challenges and counters the previously existing fixed notions. The study reveals the evidence under the light of binary oppositions of Derrida's (1976) deconstruction theory and fluidity of meaning in the short story in Tagore's "*Punishment*". The story is based on the lives of two peasant brothers Dukhiram and Chidam, and their wives Radha and Chandra. They have to share the same accommodation. Radha is short-tempered among them. One day when both brothers return home after grinding hard work, Dukhiram asks his wife Radha to bring him to feed to eat. Radha brings some aggressive words along with food which infuriates Dukhiram and he kills his wife. The anger soon vanishes and Dukhiram becomes sad about the act he has performed. Chidam feels sad for his brother and asks his wife, Chandara, to take responsibility for the murder herself and act in court as if she has killed Radha in self-defense aggressive arguments. Chandara is shocked by this unjust demand from her husband and her feelings of love are shattered. She wants to help her husband and ends up giving her own life to a man who has no true feelings for her. In court, she takes charge of the murder committed by her brother-in-law. After the decision, her husband realizes his mistake and wants to take responsibility for his murder of himself. Meanwhile, Dukhiram tells the judge what happens but all in vain. The judge makes Chandara accountable for the murder and she is sentenced to death.

The study aims at unraveling the stable truths present in the work with the application of passive tactics of exploring a text and reading, and questions the truths and structures by subverting such truths to check the production of enigmatic undecidable. The study explores the lives of two peasant brothers, Chidam and Dukhiram, who exploit their power position in the family structure to abuse their wives both physically and mentally. The analysis depicts that the author has unconsciously displayed two different ideologies within the text. The female heroine of the story tries to subvert the power dynamics of the societal constructs. In this struggle, she loses her life and gets a hollow victory.

Apart from *Punishment*, Rabindranath Tagore (a famous figure in Bengali Literature) has written a huge number of short stories by the end of the 19th century. His short stories appeared in the 1890s and chiefly give more importance to the individuality of humans above the caste and class demarcations that define them in religious and political practices. Every character receives his sympathy or antipathy according to his peculiarities and ethical merits regardless of his ethnic identity or class. His stories revolve around the discussion of male and female partners in marriage, dowry acquisition, and various social issues. The objective of the study is to explore male and female characters in the short story that are reflected as binary oppositions and to find out whether deconstruction theory can re-interpret and subvert the power dynamics between two genders in the tale "*Punishment*". Moreover, the study focuses on finding answers to the following questions: how male and female characters in the short story *Punishment* are reflected as binary oppositions? How deconstruction theory can re-interpret and subvert the power dynamics between two genders in "*Punishment*"?

Literature Review

Derrida (1960) pioneered deconstructionist approach as a response to structuralism and textual analysis in field of literary criticism. According to Barry (2002), the position of autonomy of language has shifted from a structuralistic stance to a post-structuralistic view which is based on a plurality of interpretations and meanings of the text and the denial of one single truth. Therefore, the deconstruction approach can be considered as a kind of post-structuralist approach within the sphere of language and literature which endeavors to explore the inconsistent, unclear, and ambiguous link between any sign and signifier. In the views of Derrida (1976), it is important to rethink from a new position in all spheres of science, literature, or social studies to give up on demonstrativeness to interpretation. The reader can visualize the text according to his wishes by putting his own experiences in the text and offering a new modification to the understanding of the text. Matthews (1996) talks about the subjectivity of humans in language and literature. Derrida depicts himself as an assiduous reader of the text and has devoted himself to reading the writings of others and commenting on their views. Likewise, Nealon (1988) views deconstruction as a tool to study the complexities of language systems similar to huge civilizations with multi-dimensional views.

According to Sim (2002), deconstruction is above a system of thought and is enriched with strategies to fig out the proof of the unstable nature of language which is the basis of various theories. Derrida (1966) challenges the concept of fixed interpretation in his work '*Structure, Sign and Play in Discourse of Human Sciences*' and presents a decentred view of the universe where nothing is fixed and stable. Culler (1983) encounters the idea of logo centralism by establishing plurality and multiplicity of meanings.

Tyson (2006) connects the concept of plurality to semiotics and put forth word (sign) as a path to various interpretations and meanings (signifiers). According to Barthes (1968), deconstruction paved way for "*The Death of the Author*" which helps in freeing the text from connection to the author and multiplicity of interpretations. He asserts that the interpretations and meanings are not confined to any context or thought of the author (Barthes, 1968). According to the Deconstruction view, there is no absolute truth, identity or reality. Bauman (1992) challenges the pre-established ideologies and theories of knowledge with fixed interpretations. Deconstruction analysts see deconstruction as a tool to dig out the ambiguities and contradictions within a text to scramble and challenge the fixed and accepted meanings. Johnson (1980) says that the deconstructive approach is not similar to destruction rather it is an exploration of differences.

Leitch (1983) sees deconstruction as a way to decipher the established and stable truths of any literary work by employing passive tactics of reading and questioning these truths to subvert the power dynamics of enigmatic undecidable. Taylor (2001) sees it as a methodological strategy to dig out the suppressed and denied meanings within a text. Barry (2002) claims deconstructionist theory to be an oppositional reading of textual harassment. He outlines how deconstruction is carried out by post-structuralists giving three different models consisting of linguistic, textual, and verbal levels. Cuddon (1991) highlights the ability to subvert the polarity in binary oppositions such as male/female, morning/evening, etc. Such binary oppositions tend to present one as privileged or superior with more power whereas the other is always subservient and

oppressed. Deconstruction reverts such kinds of binary oppositions making the oppressed and submissive desirable and more attractive (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2007).

Deconstruction tends to challenge all the pre-established rigid theories in language and literature and therefore, it enjoys great appeal in literary spheres. The present study is concerned with the dismantling of the critical views against feminism in the short story. Feminist criticism is a tool to undermine and reinforce the cultural productions and literature based on the social, political, economic, psychological, and cultural oppression of women. Such criticism came into existence as a product of the Feminist Movement (1960) and endeavors to combat the depiction of women as weak and fragile (Barry, 2002). Feminist criticism challenges the display of women in literature which adds to the condition of some of the socially acceptable values for women. Deconstruction and Feminist criticism are two different fields of literary exploration but are interconnected to each other. Poovey (1988) explored the connection between these two in her work "Feminism and Deconstruction". She puts forth the questions and challenges of deconstruction on feminism. According to Elam (1993), deconstruction can aid feminism more than what feminism offers deconstruction and it is not possible to regard them as mirror images of each other. Lashari and Awan (2012) apply the model of Berry (2002) for a deconstruction of the short story "*The Cow*" using its three stages. The analysis reflects that the story is replete with many interpretations. Munir (2013) applies a similar model of deconstruction to the short story "*Dingo*" and found a plurality of meanings in the text. A comparative analysis of Mueenuddin and Manto's short story with a deconstructive view to find out the authentic voice of the marginalized is done by Said (2016). However, "Punishment" remains unexplored. The present study aims to find out the binary opposites in the story and to subvert the power dynamics presented in the story between genders. The deconstruction is done with a feministic stance.

Various studies have analyzed the short story 'Punishment' by Tagore from different perspectives. Like, Davis (2008) in his study 'Navigating the Ghāt: Gender and nation in Tagore's short fiction' highlighted the perspective that hybridization was taking place in the lives of Indian women in the British era. Banerjee (2014) in his book 'Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Spaces' presented the concept that silence has been used as a dangerous supplement by the female character and whose denial to subjugate to the set patterns of society tries to shackle the fixed patterns of society and in a way reconceptualizes interaction of gender. Dominic (2013) in his study, 'Chandora and Sashikala: Strong and Daring Heroines of Tagore's Short Fictions '*Punishment*' and '*Elder Sister*', pointed out that Tagore has presented few heroines who possess great willpower, face hardships, and consequently meet their tragic ends. Suma (2019) has studied the short story from an ecofeminist perspective and pointed out in her study that Tagore has presented the Indian female characters as kind, obedient as well as religious. Viha Samrutha (2018) in his study 'Feminism Portrayed in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore' pointed out that Tagore has given the freedom to his heroines to make their decisions and thus presented them as stronger characters. However, the study of the short story from the perspective of deconstruction has not been undertaken. To fill the gap, the present study tries to analyze the story from a deconstructive point of view.

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative descriptive analysis of the short story "*Punishment*" by Rabindranath Tagore. The data for analysis is taken from the text and is analyzed by

using the method of deconstruction by identifying binary oppositions within a text, reversing the prevalent hierarchal structure, and exploring hidden meanings in the text concerning the feministic perspective. To explore the binary opposition and deconstruct hierarchy, it is significant to understand the concept of inferior and superior so that reality can be distinguished from the opposition. Derrida is one of the most complex and influential French philosophers of the late 20th century. Derrida (1976) develops a new literary theory in his book “*Of Grammatology*” to give a new dimension to literary criticism. He suggests how our reading of the literary text should be done. Biesta (2001) claims that Derrida figured out the complicity between reading and writing. This shows that human communication and writing are prone to misunderstandings and misconceptions. Derrida (1976) claims that writing becomes necessary when speech fails to perform its responsibilities. In this way, writing is seen as a supplement to speech. In view of Derrida (1976), it is important to rethink from a new position in all spheres of science, literature, or social studies to give up on demonstrativeness to interpretation. The reader can visualize the text according to his wishes by putting his own experiences in the text and offering a new modification to the understanding of the text. Matthews (1996) talks about the subjectivity of humans in language and literature. Derrida depicts himself as an assiduous reader of the text and has devoted himself to reading the writings of others and commenting on their views. Derrida develops deconstruction in the late 1960s which states that all the texts are ambiguous. The term ambiguity means something that has multiple meanings. He published three books in 1967 and was given the term “*Difference*”. Hobson (1998) describes the difference as a term without any logical operation, acting as opposition and negative. According to Derrida (1973) difference is a necessary condition to maintain the plenitude and fullness of any discourse.

Binary opposition is a means to see or interpret the common way to find oppositions in pairs, for example, meaningful and meaningless, day and night, center and periphery, and truth and misunderstanding. Derrida attempts to demolish such oppositions and to change the view of people in the society regarding their way of thinking and look at the marginalized as a tool to show something as central. In other words, the use of one word to describe the other, although, there are no words that can be correctly defined by creating a difference of meaning. Similarly, Beauvior (1997) claims that the world has always been a man's world. She further claims that man is the center of this world and enjoys all the authority whereas women are marginalized and suppressed. This study is focusing on the deconstruction of the male/female binary developed by the societal structures by reversing the polarity. Females are given a prestigious place by prioritizing them whereas males are made powerless and de-authoritative.

Discussion and Analysis

The analysis of the short story is based on the concept of deconstruction by Derrida (1978). It has been implied to highlight as well as undermine the binary oppositions being presented in the text. The main object of deconstruction is binary oppositions, which are not intended to search for variations of meanings in a text. Rather, the rhetoric of opposition is based on the realization that there is no one final and fixed reality, and simultaneously no absoluteness of truth (Derrida, 1982). Similar oppositions can be found in the short story and there can be at least two interpretations for the same story.

In the case of “*Punishment*”, there is one related to radical feminism while the other reading is justifying and re-establishing the patriarchal constructs in the society. To demonstrate that those different readings are present in the same story, it is necessary

to use Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. This theory was born as a response to the structuralist theories, being its main objective to demonstrate that there are no structures present in a piece of writing. Moreover, Derrida states that there are not even genres (legal texts, scientific texts, etc) but only "texts".

The elements analyzed under the light of structuralism can be reinterpreted. This possibility of giving a new reading to those elements present throughout the text can be considered a tension. The tensions created particularly by the binary oppositions within the text are disassembled because, as Derrida argued, these oppositions are arbitrary and intrinsically unstable. The structures themselves begin to overlap and collide, and ultimately, dismantle themselves from inside the text. In particular, the negativization of dichotomies should be reformulated under a new sign, from the positive, to get the balance between opposites. This can only be achieved through a new interpretation. This new reading will be given, first, by evincing, criticizing, and questioning the reading generally perceived.

Binary Oppositions and Deconstruction within *Punishment*

Tolerant and Intolerant

Inside Tagore's short story, a clear distinction between the male characters and the female characters is done; the male is tolerant and they tolerate the injustices done to them by the landlords, for instance, "*they got soaked in the rain; they were probably not paid for their labors and the abuses that were hurled at them throughout the day were more than what they deserved* (Tagore, 2019, p. 157) while the female characters are portrayed as intolerant and quarrelsome beings, with animal-like behavior where "*the elder wife exploded like a keg of gunpowder lit by a flame. In a voice that reached the heavens* (Tagore, 2019, p. 157).

From this excerpt of the text, the opposition is more than clear. Nevertheless, we consider that it can be broken and re-interpreted, by understanding the characters from a different view. This opposition is given by the Dukhiram versus Radha, the latter being directly shown as intolerant with animalistic manners, without morals, and with a low intellectual level. This image contributes to the generation of patriarchal ideology in the story because, by presenting such a picture of female characters, the writer is giving a higher position to the male characters by showing them on the upper strata in case of tolerance and morals.

Nevertheless, if we consider the binary opposition of tolerant and the intolerant represented respectively by the male and female characters, the separating line becomes blurry when Dukhiram in a fit of fury kills his wife and "roared like an angry tiger, "What did you say?"... And unthinkingly he picked up his axe and brought it down upon his wife's head (Tagore, 2019, p. 157).

In this way, one of the main oppositions in which the story is built collapses by itself, based on the actions of its characters. We believe that through the story "Punishment" there is no consistency in the behavior of the characters, making it impossible to keep this dichotomy standing, largely dismantling the initial storyline.

Selfish and Selfless

Two opposing positions of selfishness and selflessness can be seen at the start of the story when Chidam blames the death of her sister-in-law on his wife, he is letting his emotions take control of his reason and in a way acts selfishly.

Chidam had been completely stunned and unable to think anything; many improbable explanations had risen in his mind. He blurted it out without thinking. If I lose my wife, I can always get another one, but if my brother hangs I cannot get another brother. (Tagore, 2019, p. 159)

The deconstruction of male/female societal norms is shattered here and the characters appear to be different. Both the brothers try to take the accusation on themselves to save Chandara but they also have a hidden agenda because they want Chandara to live with their support. The selflessness is showing their positive side but the hidden motto is that of being in a powerful position. Likewise, Chandara also behaves both selfless and selfishly; selfless when she takes up the accusation of murder and later selfishly when her husband wants to save her but 'she seemed determined to get herself hanged' and she wanted to get away from that 'monster husband'. The text dismantles this opposition by bringing closer the positions of the male and female characters, both of them acted selfishly and selflessly at different points. Chandara tries to take the charge of a crime she has not committed for herself for the sake of her family pride and her husband, but later on, denies accepting all the instructions by creating a small room for self-respect and self-pride by giving up her life.

But when Chidam took the witness stand that day, he broke into tears, and with his hands joined together in a gesture of pleading, he cried, "My wife has done nothing wrong. When Chidam was interrogated, he said, "I have committed the murder" When Dukhiram was called into the witness stand, he fainted. When he recovered, he said, "Your Honour, I have committed the murder". (Tagore, 2019, p. 162)

Another way of questioning this dichotomy is by questioning the motives of the characters. Chandara admits the murder to get away from her husband and to get rid of society and its expectations. So the motives of the characters show females as more selfish and in a way show the male characters as selfless so here again, Tagore unintentionally supports patriarchy.

Struggle for Control

The analysis of power structure in the text shows that power does not lie with any single participant throughout the text; it is continuously shifting between the two. As Chandara has the last word so to some extent the story highlights the ideology of feminism. Therefore, another binary opposition that has been established between the characters is strong and weak; the one who is controlling and the other who is being controlled. Chidam tries to save his wife Chandara from death execution, whereas his wife sticks to the lie. The husband warns his wife to claim that she was attacked by her sister-in-law during an argument whereas she killed her sister-in-law in her defense. During the trial Chandara says that she was not provoked by the attack, thus, putting herself in a risky position by taking a stance opposite to the one given by her dominating husband. She exerts that the only tool to sedition is a denial of seeing her husband before execution. She contemptuously exclaims "to hell with him".

Contrasting Ideologies in the text

In the general reading of the text, it seems that Tagore is presenting the idea of radical feminism where they (women) take a stand for themselves and try to get rid of patriarchy but the deconstructive analysis of the text shows that Tagore highlights the ideology of patriarchy by showing that no matter how hard you try, you can never end this. Chandara obeyed her husband to some extent by sacrificing herself for the owner of the family. She becomes a victim of the punishment for not obeying all the

instructions given by her husband to be presented in court. She fails to save herself in protest to the instructions of her husband by her rebelliousness. This appears to be a hollow victory. Chidam, on the other hand, gets his goal of gaining his brother's freedom. He acknowledges in the text, "If I lose my wife, I can get another" (Tagore, 2019, p. 159), by contemplating that the death of his wife can bring peace and harmony to his home. Chandara can be witnessed as a victim of male oppression despite all her efforts to thwart this oppression. Although she tried hard to get rid of these patriarchal constraints she could not get rid of them even though she lost her life. Her last decision highlights the ideology of feminism but her death at the same time highlights the ideology of patriarchy.

The analysis deconstructs the power dynamics by exploring that the presented woman does not submit to the instructions of her husband completely. She decides to protest it passively and challenges the customs and set norms of the society. She rejects the humiliation in a passive and submissive way by showing her husband her hatred against him at the end of the story. When she is asked in jail for her last will to see anyone, she wants to see her mother instead of her husband. She defies the rigid meaning of the sacrifice of women for sake of others by resisting patriarchal suppression and supremacy. She decides to sacrifice her life for her self-respect and self-assertion. She decides to die instead of living with an unloving and selfish husband. Her actions depict that she has the power and right to make decisions for herself.

Conclusion

The analysis concludes that the author has unconsciously displayed two different ideologies within the text. The female heroine of the story tries to subvert the power dynamics of the societal constructs. In this struggle, she loses her life and gets a hollow victory. The deconstructive reading of the story "*Punishment*" also reflects the power dynamics of the society where men are always ranked at a higher pedestal with dominant force and authority, whereas, women are submissive and marginalized. In this story, Chidam holds the authority over his wife, whereas Chandara is presented as pathetic and weak by using different descriptive adjectives.

The analysis indicates that the story has binary oppositions but a deconstructive analysis of the text indicates that there are no fixed binary oppositions, and these oppositions keep on changing throughout the text. The story demarcates the division between selfish and selfless in the story wherein the quality of being tolerant is assigned to the male characters and the quality of being intolerant is assigned to the female characters. But the analysis of the story indicates that this demarcation ends late in the story. Likewise, the second opposition is selfish and selfless and that too ends as the story progresses, and all characters act selfishly as well as selflessly. The characters struggle for control, and their qualities keep on shifting between being strong and weak. Likewise, two contrasting ideologies are presented within the text and can be seen in the analysis of the title of the story.

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