

Women in "punishment" and in traditional india



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"Punishment" by Tagore depicts the nature of an earlier society by making its women personages powerless. This story revolves around Chandara accepting responsibility for murdering her sister-in-law, Radha. Though she is not the perpetrator, she accepts the blame at the request of her husband. This request saves his brother by accepting punishment for killing Radha. After claiming to kill her, Chandara chooses death to gain freedom. There are deep parallels between Tagore's culture and the events within the text. Through Punishment, the author criticizes how Indian society forces women to remain invisible, accept gender norms, and struggle for power.

Within "Punishment," women are invisible within their society. The emotions of women are not as important as the emotions of men. At the beginning of the story, the narrator notes that Chandara regularly argues with Radha in the morning. This bickering was said to be like "when the sun rises at dawn, no one asks why" (Tagore 964). Unlike the women, the disagreement between male laborers and their employers is recognized as an important event. Along with being unacknowledged, women are considered replaceable. Chandara's husband, Chidam, claims that he can always replace his wife, but not his brother (Tagore 966). Even though both individuals share an important role in his life, he finds the positions of women to be less important than those of men. Ultimately, this society makes women's emotions insignificant and undermines their worth as individuals. Due to this, their society dehumanizes women.

When looking at women's invisibility, we see that traditional Indian culture matches the attitude conveyed within "Punishment." Often, women are expected to be silent about their living conditions for their families. Alike to

the text, the society does not care about the emotions of women. Modern Indian women are expected to cope with circumstances such as violence. Even in the case of domestic abuse, young girls are told that "once you go over there you can come back only as a dead body" (Crossette). For Indian women, family prestige creates a silencing environment for suffering women. The replaceable nature of women is shared in real-life India. There is a preference for males in all aspects of society. The overwhelming preference for sons "has led to millions of female infants being killed at birth or killed through malnourishment and neglect" (Phillip). Typically, men are celebrated and associated with financial stability. Tagore wanted to show the consequences of valuing men over women in Punishment. Women's invisibility causes unjust punishment upon all women, whether by the government or the hands of their families.

In "Punishment," women were expected to abide by gender norms. Chandara and Radha were expected to obey their husbands, perform domestic duties, and dress appropriately. The description of the women reflects these attitudes. Radha was deemed less womanly and desirable, since she was "utterly disorganized in her dress, housework, and the care of her child" (Tagore 966). While the author does not explicitly state the reason for Chidam's brother to kill Radha, his expectations may have caused him to kill her. Since wives are expected to behave the opposite of Radha, Chidam's brother may have acted out of rage. Within the context of this society, this might have been considered a reasonable excuse. The relationship of Chandara and Chidam may further prove this point. Once Chandara acted against her husband's wishes, he began to wonder "if it would be better if

she were dead" (Tagore 967). Since insubordinate women provoke this extreme hatred, it is reasonable to believe that the society would undermine their deaths due to straying from gender norms.

Historical India shares this society's predilection for gender norms. Even the penal code to protect women against violence involves abiding by such norms, since it describes violence against women as outraging a woman's modesty. When taking into account the cultural values around modesty, this only protects women who adhere to gender norms. Indian culture generally agrees that a " woman who chooses to dress the way she wants, walk where and when she pleases is discounted; she cannot be a modest woman" (Phillip). Thus, the expectation for modesty provides a caveat for governmental protection against violence. Therefore, such expectations can excuse violence or create evidence there was none. Tagore wanted to criticize this attitude by highlighting gender norms in " Punishment." The text may slightly exaggerate in representation of gender norms, but the author ultimately shows the dire consequences of holding such prejudice.

Women in " Punishment" struggle for power, since their society strips away their individuality. For example, Chidam claims she murdered Radha without Chandara's consent to cover for his brother. In turn, this causes Chandara to accept guilt at the request of her husband. This power imbalance is further amplified before this crisis. It began with a confrontation between the two after Chandara tried to leave. Chidam " grabbed her by the hair, dragged her back to the room and locked her in" (Tagore 967). Chandara tries to regain independence by fleeing to her maternal uncle's house. After this conflict, she gains more power in the relationship until this crisis strips this away.

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Following Chandara's acceptance of guilt, she regains her independence by selecting her punishment. Since she was unlikely to escape this unhappy marriage, she chooses to give her "youth to the gallows" (Tagore 968). Ultimately, her struggle for independence and free will led her to take her life, which can represent a suicide.

The circumstances behind the suicide of Chandara are not confined to the text of "Punishment." Indian women find themselves powerless within their culture at its most patriarchal. They are taught to obey their husbands, a method which strips away their independence. This attitude is taught in their childhood where they are expected to "model themselves on Sita...who followed her husband into the wilderness and never failed to do his bidding" (Crossette). Through storytelling, girls learn to lose their free will at a young age. Losing such freedom has serious consequences as they mature. Since they remain powerless, women seek freedom from unhappy marriages and "poison themselves or jump from buildings or into wells" (Crossette). When taking into account the cultural context behind Punishment, Tagore's audience was expected to examine women's powerlessness. Within the author's culture, suicide was a form of freedom for women. Chandara's suicide was supposed to highlight women's powerlessness within Indian society.

"Punishment" indeed criticized the treatment of women in India. As the story indicates, Indian women are often invisible, undervalued, and powerless. Tagore uses the text to point out the consequences of such treatment. Women are expected to obey their husbands and societal norms. As a result, many of them suffer at the hands of their society. By integrating <https://assignbuster.com/women-in-punishment-and-in-traditional-india/>

the Indian culture's ideals into the text, the author was able to effectively show the impact of these ideals on women. Although the story concluded with Chandara's death, the text shows women empowerment as an important part of life. Punishment deals with India's struggle for equality and its events parallel real life.

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