



The Brahmin's Voice and the Dalit's Silence: An Ambedkarite Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's *Punishment*

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Abstract:

This article rereads Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Punishment* through the dual lenses of Ambedkarite social philosophy and Dalit literary criticism. Tagore, a universal humanist, unconsciously reproduces a text that is structured by caste hierarchies. A social allegory of Brahmanical hegemony, Dalit servitude, and patriarchal displacement is clearly evident in this story of two Dalit brothers, Dukhiram and Chidam, their wives, Radha and Chandra, and the Brahmin Ramlochan. This article argues using the Ambedkarite theoretical lens on caste that the text is evidence of dramatization of psychic and moral disintegration of Dalit lives under caste oppression, imposition of sacrificial role on Dalit women, and the author's own conscious/unconscious upper-caste perspective that anesthetizes rather than annihilates structural caste violence.



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Introduction: The Silent Caste in a Humanist Text

Punishment is a translation of the Bengali short story *Shasti* by Rabindranath Tagore. It is often read as a story of tragic irony, patriarchal domination of women, and moral blindness. What is fundamental to the story's structure is that the caste locations of the story's characters are often omitted in most readings of Tagore's works, where Dukhiram and Chidam being landless Dalit dependent on Brahmin landlord Ramlochan, who "owed him a lot of back rent" of the house (Husain, 2017, p. 205). This story, which is much appreciated for highlighting universal moral tragedy, but, at the core, fails to highlight it as a caste parable. An Ambedkarite reading would interpret the text as how Brahmanical domination furthers intra-Dalit violence and ritualizes the punishment of the oppressed. Tagore, being a Brahmin man, is complicated by the paraphernalia of the caste structure prevalent in society, which makes him sensitive on residing in the domain of humanism but leaves him socially blind. Thus, regarding this criticism, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd in his book *Why I am Not a Hindu*, notes, "the upper-caste humanist can sympathize but cannot dismantle caste" (Ilaiah, 1996, p. 53). Caste hierarchy is naturalized in his narrative, which is operated within an epistemic frame. The very title *Punishment* implies moral retribution or tragedy, submission to an ordained order. Kalpana Bardhan writes, "The oppressor is ultimately some aspect of the cultural ideology and the social situation in which both men and women feel themselves trapped because of some socially bred dysfunction of the individual will and psyche" (Bardhan, 1990, p. 14).

Theoretical Framework: Ambedkarite Hermeneutics and Dalit Aesthetics

A critical foundation for a Dalit reading of Tagore's short story would be provided by Ambedkar's philosophy. The concept of division of labour, irrespective of one's own birth, is universal. However, when caste is applied, it becomes complicated, as Ambedkar tells, "Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also division of labourers." (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 29). Graded inequality, as Ambedkar termed it, has its roots in religion, as supported by Brahmanical texts, particularly the Manusmriti. In mainstream Indian writings, aesthetic imagination plays an important role, but, as Saran Kumar Limbale argues, in Dalit aesthetics it arises from "experience of social slavery, not imagination" (Limbale, 2004, p. 31). Critically applying this theoretical framework would require two positions: the social texture of oppression in the narrative and the ideological blindness of its Brahmin author. A New Criticism approach might minimize textual structure, revealing the caste logic behind linguistic and narrative patterns, e.g., names, hunger, guilt, and silence. On the contrary, an Ambedkarite re-reading re-historicizes and exposes it.

The Semiotics of Naming

According to Manusmriti (2.31-32), the name a Brahmin bears "auspiciousness" and "happiness" whereas the name of a Sudra bears the connotation of "disdain" and "service" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 96). The dogmatic prescription of Manusmriti finds its wholesome application in Tagore's short story. The onomastics of the two 'Rui family' brothers is clothed in caste-based connotation in this story. The nomenclature of the two "low-caste Rui family" Dalit brothers are Dukhiram and Chidam (Modak & Misra, 2014, p. 632). The Bengali meaning of these two names is 'full of sorrow' and 'torn apart', which bear the semantic weight of degradation. Quite contrary, the name of a Brahmin neighbor is Ramlochan, which literally means the eye of Rama. It metaphorically conveys the notion of purity and divine vision. This is how the language of the

text is systematically structured in the frame of caste-based hierarchy. Thus, the ideological inscription of caste hierarchy in the nomenclature is not accidental but conscious on the part of the author. Brahmanism ensured castes in names, and Tagore wittily carried it forward, where mere utterance of one's names marks social rank. The story's first punishment is the very identity of names, where a Dalit man is linguistically condemned before he speaks. The meaning of the name 'Chandra' is moon. In mainstream reading, the moon is often seen as gentle and luminous. Tagore's description of Chandra goes like- "Chandra was no more than seventeen or eighteen. Her face was soft and round, her stature not very tall. There was such a tilt in her petite, lithe limbs that every movement seemed fluid and rhythmic... her restless, bright, black eyes by parting slightly the aanchal, end of her sari with two fingers" (Hussain, 2016, p. 207). A Dalit perspective is somewhat different. The moon has no light of its own. Its visibility depends on the sun. Therefore, its light is borrowed, reflected, and derivative. Caste-ridden society positions Dalits as secondary beings in relation to the upper-castes. Chandra's voice is like a periodic eclipse of the moon, which is overshadowed by patriarchal authority and caste-coded control over female agency. Chandra's beauty is like an emptied luminosity, without autonomy.

The moon in Dalit literature is often portrayed as faded dignity, systematic silencing, borrowed existence, and erasure under dominant narratives. Radha is the wife of elder brother Dukhiram. In vernacular and Puranic traditions, Radha becomes a paradoxical and problematic figure for Brahmanical interpreters. Her desire is illicit, transgressive, destabilizing to varnaashrama dharma, and coded as asuddha, meaning impure or obscene. Therefore, Brahmanical commentators defend this discomfort by mythologizing her desire into divine bhakti, sanitizing the illicitness as a metaphysical metaphor, and subsuming her sexual agency into Krishna's divinity. To maintain Brahmanical moral hegemony, her agency is erased. Tagore depicts Radha as quarrelsome. The quarrelsome quality of Radha must have a Brahmanical purification; she must be disciplined and allegorized through death. Regarding the connotation of these names that Tagore assigned to his characters can well align with the observation Ambedkar made in his *Annihilation of Caste*, "The literature of the Hindus is full of caste genealogies in which an attempt is made to give a noble origin to one caste and an ignoble origin to other castes" (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 35).

Labour, Hunger, and Humiliation: The Structure of Exploitation

Dalit economic life is ingrained in caste. The unrewarded toil of the brothers returning home after the whole day's work is narrated in the story. "Only the two brothers were forced by the landlord's thugs to work on his house. All day they worked on his house... They could not come home for lunch... they were probably not paid for their labours and the abuses that were hurled at them throughout the day were more than what they deserved" (Hussain, 2016, p. 204-205). They worked throughout their entire lives for the landlord, but in return, wages were withheld, and they suffered humiliation. It is a recurring motif of economic expropriation. Taking references from The Sapru Committee, Ambedkar writes, "The Depressed Classes (Dalits) have no economic independence in most parts of the Presidency. Some cultivate the lands of the orthodox classes as their tenants at will. Others live on their earnings as farm labourers... Orthodox Classes have used their economic power as a weapon against those depressed classes in their villages, when the latter have dared to exercise their rights, and have

evicted them from their land, and stopped their employment and discontinued their remuneration as village servants” (Ambedkar, 1947, p. 40).

One can cross-verify what Ambedkar quotes with the help of a critical observation of R. C. Dutt: “Zemindars (upper-caste men) still possess to an indefinite extent the power to oppress, harass and ruin their ryots (peasants/Dalits) in a variety of ways against which the law offers no redress, and that therefore in most places ryots are still held in a sort of moral servitude, and comply, without thinking of resistance, with the most unjust demands and orders of their masters” (Dutt, 1874, p. 134). Being deprived of food, space, and dignity, Dalit Dukhiram’s final act of murder is the psychic outburst of systematic dehumanization. Tagore’s omniscient narration records their hunger and humiliation within poetic restraint but lacks political revolt. Sharmila Rege’s observation is very similar to it, that “upper-caste humanism converts the pain of caste into moral emotion, not political critique” (Rege, 2006, p. 57). Landlords (belonging to the upper-castes) are one of the agents in the structure of exploitation. Through this mechanism, they perpetuate cheap or unpaid labour, hunger, and humiliation to the Dalit communities. Therefore, Ambedkar, in order to end landlordism, writes in his *States and Minorities*, “The land shall be let out to villagers without distinction of castes and creed and in such manner that there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless labourers” (Ambedkar, 1947, p. 16)

Parallel Determinisms: From Caste Mechanism to Cosmic Absurdity

Dukhiram “unthinkingly picked up his axe and brought it down upon her head. Radha fell near Chandra’s lap and died instantaneously” (Hussain, 2016, p. 205). This act of killing his wife in *Punishment* has often been dismissed as a moment of domestic impulsiveness. However, a Dalit critical lens would interpret it somewhat differently. It is a result of the violent culmination of an entire system of caste-based discrimination and exploitation. His ill temper, anger, and despair are not his weaknesses but symptoms of structural oppression. It is a spontaneous eruption of a man who “worked” all day, “not paid for their labours” and “abused... hurled at them throughout the day”, room was “pleasureless”, “hunger gnawing inside his stomach” and suffered “humiliation” (Hussain, 2016, p. 204-205) which is a systematic denial by Brahmanical social mechanism that controls both his body and his labour. Taking Dukhiram’s condition into account, an analogy can be drawn with a character named Meursault in Albert Camus’s novel *The Outsider* (1942). Under the scorching heat of the sunlight, Meursault kills an Arab man on a beach in Algiers. “The sun was the same as it had been the day I’d buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. ... The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started” (Camus, 1989, p. 59). His killing is often interpreted as an act of existential compulsion and not a deliberate attempt because he had no earlier hatred or motive for killing him. By placing Dukhiram’s act alongside Meursault’s, Tagore’s *Punishment* can be read as a proto-existential exploration of caste-based absurdity. Dukhiram’s experience is universalized in comparison with *The Outsider*.

The Brahmin’s Role: Ramlochan as Custodian as Caste Morality

Brahmins, by caste, act as moral authorities and mediators in a village within the Brahmanical social order. Ramlochan is not an exception in this story. Chidam obediently adheres to the proposal of Ramlochan to accuse Chandra of Radha’s murder. Tagore narrates, “The original

idea was Ramlochan's" (Hussain, 2016, p. 209). Caste psychology is strongly highlighted in these lines, where a Brahmin's suggestion becomes law as Tagore narrates: "When it came to giving advice on legal matters, Ramlochan was known to be "Prime Minister" of the village" (Hussain, 2026, p. 206). Chidam, realizing his mistake, prepared to tell the truth by folding hands; with tearful eyes, he cried, "My wife has done nothing wrong." Gradually, the truth began to emerge. Nevertheless, the lawyer did not believe him because the principal witness, Ramlochan, said: "I arrived at the place of occurrence soon after the incident. Witness Chidam admitted everything to me. He held on to my legs and begged me, "Please tell me, how can I save my wife? I gave him no advice, good or bad. And he (Ramlochan) narrated all that he thought he knew; in fact, he added in a few decorative touches of his own"" (Hussain, 2016, p. 210-211). Thus, this piece of Brahmin's advice is nothing but a manifestation of textual cruelty where Brahmanism is preserved through transferring guilt downward, into the weaker and the women. The brothers, being Dalits, had no other options and, being conditioned in a Brahmanical atmosphere of obedience, accepted his advice as divine counsel. The brothers, as oppressed, internalize the Brahmin oppressor's logic and enact it upon their own, which Ambedkar calls 'the rituals of displacement'.

Brahmanical Reconfiguration of Loyalty within Dalit Masculinity

An ideological mechanism within Brahmanism is where Dalit men are reorganized to sustain upper-caste hegemony through their emotional and social allegiance. Masculinity, like mastery, autonomy, and honour, is historically denied to the Dalit men within the Brahmanical social order. On the contrary, Dalit men are conditioned to adopt and reshape manhood to obedience, endurance to pain, suffering, and humiliation, and provide service to the upper-caste. Dalit men's masculinity is reconfigured in such a way that they transform their loyalty to preserve and perpetuate the Brahmanical social order. Dalit men, Guru argues, lack access to the symbolic capital of purity and authority associated with Brahmanical masculinity and are nevertheless compelled to display loyalty to it in order to survive within the caste hierarchy (Guru, 1995, p. 2549). This Brahmanical ideology destroys collective Dalit solidarity, which enhances servitude as a moral virtue. To maintain the servitude, two Dalit brothers, Dukhiram and Chidam, reject allegiance to their own suffering class and female kinship by adhering to the suggestion of Brahmin Ramlochan. Dukhiram's anger is not against the humiliation suffered by upper-caste men but instead directed at his wife, Radha. Chidam also does the same by preferring Brahmanical patriarchy, saves his brother, and accuses his wife of killing Radha. Dalit ethics emphasizes solidarity for the oppressed, but Brahmanism teaches upper-caste values of fraternity and female disposability. The act of Chidam in the story is interpreted as selfish, but applying the Dalit lens shows that it is a caste mimicry of Brahmanical patriarchy for a survival strategy. Book chapter entitled *Indian Feminism and Dalit Patriarchy*, V. Geetha writes, "A notable feature of the exploitation of Dalit has been the humiliation of Dalit men: in the course of power that upper-caste men exert over their labour, they also taunt them about their masculinity. They claim that Dalit men can never hope to protect their women, who are considered 'easy prey' by upper-caste men. Such symbolic 'emasculatation' of Dalit men results in their feeling beleaguered in specifically gendered ways, which results in their exerting prowess in their family...sanskritisation or 'jatikarana' – intensified castification- led to upper caste norms and upper-caste patriarchal practices percolation into the lower-caste ranks too" (Arya & Rathore, 2020, pp. 61-62). It shows

that both brothers are powerless in the Brahmanical social order; therefore, their anger is directed at Radha and Chandra. Thus, Brahmanical reconfiguration of loyalty of Dalit masculinity does the work of maintaining caste hierarchy through psychological and structural mechanisms, and in doing so, the real fangs of Brahmanism are often masked under moral or divine order. In another way, it can be said that Dalit men are not the structural authors of patriarchy; Brahmanical patriarchy is. Yet, Dalit men become its local enforcer through internalization, social conditioning, and aspirations for masculinity within a casteist society.

Chandra's Resistance: The Subaltern's Refusal to Speak

Reading the text through the theoretical framework of universal humanism, the silence of Chandra is voluntary, spiritual, and transcendental, symbolizing moral values such as purity, forgiveness, and womanly strength, and, in the end, achieving aestheticization of beauty and tragic catharsis. Thus, womanly restraint is idealized as universal beauty, which is what the Brahmanical-humanist aesthetic is. Sharmila Rege argues that such a universalist reading erases the material history of caste and gender and thereby turns oppression into poetry. An Ambedkarite critique would interpret this text somewhat differently. Chandra's silence is forced, violent, and socially produced muteness, which symbolizes oppression and denial of agency that challenges the moral order enforced through caste-patriarchy, and the denouement of the story is the exposure of structural injustice and voicelessness. Since language also belongs to the upper-caste, Chandra's death is not redemptive but a social consequence of a caste-patriarchal society. Thus, mainstream tradition interprets it as virtue, thereby "tends to pose a hindrance for the flourishing of gender justice for all Indian women"; the Dalit-feminist lens interprets it as a violation, where silence is transformed from an aesthetic ideal into a political symptom of exclusion (Arya & Rathore, 2020, p. 24).

Positioning Brahmanism in Tagore's Punishment

As a moral framework and an invisible oppressor, Tagore positions Brahmanism cleverly and cunningly, through which his characters' fates are governed. He tactfully and artfully embeds ideological hierarchy and Brahmanical patriarchy while ostensibly portraying a domestic tragedy of a Dalit family. Without committing direct violence, Brahmin Ramlochan's silent authority functions as the moral centre of the story, thereby legitimizing both judgment and punishment. Chidam is shown helpless while making the decision; therefore, he needs a Brahmin's approval. On the other hand, Dukhiram, "a large man with big bones and a thick nose, strong" and "indeed a rare specimen of humanity" (Hussain, 2016, p. 208), cannot raise a voice and strength against the injustice and social exploitation he suffers under the landlord. Instead, his despair is quenched by killing his wife. Therefore, this story retains Brahmin's supremacy and Dalit's inferiority. Tagore's portrayal of Chandra is a pattern echoed in Brahmanical literature as Chandra is treated merely as an object of study rather than as an agent of change capable of speaking for herself. Brahmanical ethics, when analyzed through the Ambedkarite theoretical framework, unmask the logic of violence and expose the silent tyranny portrayed in the text. Thus, Brahmanism is not named in the text but, through Tagore's art, is positioned as the invisible grammar of social tragedy.

Tagore's Caste-Bound Humanism: Reassessing the Brahmin Author's Moral Stand

An essay on Sahapedia argues that Tagore “considered caste the only rational system to prevent social destruction” (Chunder, 2018, para. 4). This notion of caste seeps into his short story *Punishment*. Injustice is exposed in the text, but its aesthetic framing neutralizes radical critique. As a Brahmin, Tagore has emotional access but not epistemic equality regarding caste oppression. Dalit humiliation and the silence of the Dalit characters of the story led them to accept inequality as a tragic inevitability. After reading this story, it can be understood that Ambedkar’s caveat regarding upper-caste reformers who, “concerned itself with the reform of the high caste Hindus Family. It consists mostly of enlightened high caste Hindus who did not feel the necessity for agitating for the abolition of caste or had not the courage to agitate for it. They fell quiet naturally, a greater urge to remove such evils as enforced widowhood... They did not stand up for the reform of the Hindu society... It did not relate to the social reform of the in the sense of the break-up of the caste system. It was never put in issue by the reformers” (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 21). The conscience of a Brahmin condemns cruelty but gives moral support to the caste hierarchy. Therefore, Tagore’s representation of Dalit lives is like compassion without consciousness, what Ambedkar says, “the consciousness that exist is the consciousness of his (high-caste Hindus) caste” (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 34). Reading this story, the privileged class or elites may get comfort, but can never get discomfort, as it never empowers the marginalized subjects. Judging Tagore from a Dalit perspective, he is more a Brahmin moralist than a revolutionary. He is never able to identify himself with Dalit characters because of his ideological stand. His emphasis is on ethical reform, not on social annihilation of caste. In this story, Tagore never mentions caste, but the society he writes about is caste-based, and he ultimately mourns its consequences. He depicted the Brahmin character Ramlochan as the voice of reason, not villainy. Injustice is portrayed beautifully through his omniscient narration, but it stops to identifying Brahmanism as its cause. Under the guise of universal humanism, Tagore keeps silent on caste; this literary echo of social silence Ambedkar wanted to break.

Tagore’s silence on caste in this story makes the text fertile for Dalit deconstruction. Thus, the Ambedkarite framework helps question, interpret, and document Brahmanical texts. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak’s comment on this issue is worth reading: “the Subaltern can speak only when the dominant discourse is interrupted” (Spivak, 1988, p. 285). Also, Saran Kumar Limbale opines, “When a non-Dalit writer writes about Dalit life, the experience is aestheticised rather than realized” (Limbale, 2004, p. 78). Tagore lacks the lived experiences of a Dalit. He writes about poor Dalits, their sufferings, and their deaths, but fails to interpret their world and to understand Dalit consciousness and caste oppression. Therefore, an authorial supremacy is always retained through aesthetic containment by the Brahmin writers when they write about Dalit lives.

Like every study, this study, which is entitled “The Brahmin’s Voice and the Dalit’s Silence: An Ambedkarite Reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Punishment*,” is not without limitations. The reverence of Tagore as a poet is not confined to Bengal alone; he is revered throughout the world. The magnanimity of his vast literary corpus is huge. An apparent reading of this article might give the impression that Tagore was a casteist who wholeheartedly practiced casteism. Some critics might claim that Tagore was not a Brahmin; he belonged to the Pirali sect. One may also argue that Tagore, in his early days, endorsed caste hierarchy in his institutions, but later he was vocal in opposing casteism. Hardly taking into consideration other major works like *Chandalika*, etc., one cannot conclude that Tagore was a casteist. Since this study interpreted the

text through the Ambedkarite theoretical framework, one might also argue that it is subject to interpretive bias due to reliance on a singular socio-cultural lens. To contextualize caste dynamics in this study, very little historical correspondence with Tagore, and no data on sociology, anthropology, or gender studies, are furnished. Therefore, this article aims to question the validity of Tagore's genealogy as Brahmin, given that the vast majority of the population knows him as a Brahmin and his stance on Casteism. Selecting a single text by Tagore is deliberate, as it would allow a deeper, more concentrated examination of caste and its implications within the narrative without diluting or digressing from the argument. To question and engage with the mainstream Tagorean scholarship, the Ambedkarite theoretical framework is applied for analysis, as it is now an established framework that provides a counterargument or interpretation foregrounding caste dynamics. Since a research article must be limited to a few pages, a close textual reading and critical discourse analysis are deliberately employed. The primary objective is to generate critical questions and enquiries for further study of Tagore's works in the light of caste in a much broader way.

Conclusion

Analyzing the story's text through Ambedkarite hermeneutics, *Punishment* becomes a microcosm of caste-hierarchical India, where Dalit men are humiliated, discriminated, and forced into violence consciously or unconsciously. Besides, Dalit women are sacrificed to restore social purity under the guise of legal justice, and thereby, reaffirms the caste-system. Since Brahmin's suggestion becomes law, they consequently become custodian of caste morality. Unlike Ambedkar and other Dalit writers, Tagore's aesthetic humanism and narrative empathy do not annihilate the structure of caste oppression, as he is not above his caste inheritance. Despite Tagore's intentions, the text becomes a document of caste historiography with a detailed portrayal of hunger, injustice, humiliation, and the Brahmin's manipulation. Readers can reclaim *Punishment* as a text of exposure rather than exaltation. A Brahmin Ramlochan speaks, but Dalit characters are silent, and in this silence Dalit subjects finally speak. Interpreting these texts using caste angles, Ambedkar's observation might encapsulate the findings: "Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity for the needy. Sufferings as such call for no response. There is charity, but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy but not for men of other caste" (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 42).

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