

Deconstructing Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT:

Deconstruction is a genre of literary criticism that investigates hidden or paradoxical meanings within literary texts. It seeks to intertwine two hermeneutical approaches: uncovering the “stable” truths of a work, and then looking for ways in which these truths can be subverted. Its principal advocate, Jacques Derrida, claims that fixed interpretations of texts are unattainable, and all texts are composed of inherently unstable elements.

I intend to examine three works by Rabindranath Tagore using deconstructive methodology to explore husband-wife conflicts. These conflicts are expressed in the wider realm of socio-legal-political systems. The terms into which these conflicts articulate themselves fit into the various types of “binary oppositions” employed by deconstructionists, and ultimately invert the accepted hierarchy (in this case, male superiority). I also aim to expose destabilizing elements in the text, and demonstrate that certain enigmas arise from a critical analysis.

The juxtaposition of opposites and the infinite potential for free play within a literary text are characteristics that attract literary critics to deconstruction as an analytical tool. They also restrain a literary critic from believing a particular interpretation with too great a degree of finality.

INTRODUCTION:

Deconstruction as a movement in literary theory began as a reaction to structuralist interpretations of literature, especially those proposed by Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure. Whereas structuralists perceive certain signs and images in texts as providing definitive meanings, deconstructionists believe that meanings are disseminated, and fixed interpretations of literary texts are unattainable. Though deconstruction has frequently been criticized for its inability to provide conclusions about the import of a particular work, it is a valuable tool for exposing dichotomies within texts, as well as restraining the literary critic from believing a particular analysis with too great a degree of finality. Deconstruction facilitates a hermeneutical approach that exposes ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning. Vincent Leitch writes in *Deconstructive Criticism*, “It aims to decipher the stable truths of a work, employing conventional ‘passive’ tactics of reading; it seeks to question and subvert such truths in an active production of enigmatic undecidables” (4). With this premise, I will examine the two plays, *Sacrifice* and *The King and the Queen*, by Rabindranath Tagore, and the short story, “Punishment.”

DISCUSSION:

These three texts center about the conflict between a man and a woman. Deconstruction defines such opposing forces as “binary oppositions,” with one traditionally ranked above the other. In the logocentrism of Western European thought, the male occupies the superior eche-

lon. Deconstructionists attempt to subvert established hierarchies by elevating the inferior classification to a superior status. I will examine three scenarios in Tagore's works where women act powerfully. In *The King and the Queen*, Queen Sumitra defies her husband, King Vikram, by involving herself in matters of state and taking politics into her own hands. In the short story "Punishment," a wife fails to follow her husband's instructions in a murder case; and finally, in *Sacrifice*, Queen Gunavati disobeys King Govinda's decree abolishing animal sacrifice for the goddess Kali.

The action in "Punishment" unfolds thus: two peasant brothers and their wives share living accommodations. The short-tempered, slovenly wife, Radha, is killed by her husband, Dukhiram, in a fit of temper for failing to prepare the evening meal. The village chief intrudes on the scene immediately following the murder, and the other brother, Chidam, unwittingly identifies his beautiful wife, Chandara, as the perpetrator. Prior to her imprisonment pending trial, Chidam instructs Chandara to lie to protect her brother-in-law. At this point, dichotomies in the male/female hierarchy emerge. Before this catastrophe, despite their love for each other, Chandara and Chidam have quarreled. Chandara suspected her husband of infidelity, so began flirting at the watering hole. He then threatened her bodily harm and locked her in the house. She escaped to a relative's house, but was persuaded to return only after Chidam "had to surrender to her." Tagore relates, "It was as hard to restrain his wife as to hold a handful of mercury," but contradicts this description with the assertion that Chidam "did not have to use force any more" to control his wife. Chandara has achieved a sort of power by submission, itself a paradox. Where the balance of power lies in this relationship is uncertain.

The chain of events after the murder further exposes this complexity. The agreement between husband and wife is that Chidam will save Chandara from execution, while she acquiesces to his lie. Chidam expects Chandara to relate that her sister-in-law attacked her and the sister-in-law was killed in self-defense. After being taken into custody by the police, Chandara tells them the attack was unprovoked and puts her own life at risk by defying her husband. She wields the ultimate weapon of sedition by refusing to see him before her execution, contemptuously exclaiming, "To hell with him." She accepts the injustice of a punishment for a crime she did not commit in order to punish Chidam for forcing her into an intolerable position and will not give him the satisfaction of saving her. Chidam gets her to take the blame for the crime but is unable to achieve the outcome he desires—getting his wife back. In the male/female hierarchy, Chandara seems to have the last word.

This reasoning is less conclusive than it appears. A deconstructionist approach demands further scrutiny. At some level, Chandara has obeyed, by sacrificing herself for family honor. She bears the punishment for disobeying her husband's instructions. She is not able to save herself, so her defiance is a hollow victory. Chidam has achieved his goal of getting his brother off. Earlier in the narrative, Chidam acknowledged, "If I lose my wife, I can get another," and contemplated that Chandara's demise would bring peace to the house. Chandara can be seen as a victim of male authority, despite her attempts to thwart it. These questions demonstrate the inherent instability of Tagore's text, a feature deconstructionists perceive at the heart of all literary works.

"Punishment" also demonstrates the instability of the concept of truth. The lie initially suggested by Chidam to protect his brother-in-law is accepted as the truth, and the real story is used to refute the lie. The village chief advises Chidam to say what actually happened, which Chidam cannot, having already corrupted the truth. Derrida would laud the manner in

which lie and truth dance around one another in the story. Chidam's problem is that his wife will not go along with the lie concocted to save her. She insists on yet another lie, one designed to defy Chidam and incriminate herself. Chidam correctly accuses her of lying, but is caught in a trap from which he cannot extricate himself. Ironically, when Dukhiram confesses to the crime in court in a last-ditch effort to save his sister-in-law, the judge does not believe him because his statement contradicts the evidence already heard. Dukhiram's protestations of his sister-in-law's innocence serve only to convince the court of her culpability, reversing the notion that "the truth shall set you free." What constitutes a legal fact in the eyes of the court, for all intents and purposes, is the truth.

While the male/female binary opposition in "Punishment" projects its conflict into local politics and the legal system, a similar conflict in *The King and the Queen* expands into the national arena, bringing state and family into opposition. Traditionally, a political rule is expected to place family obligations in abeyance to those of the state. Tagore reverses the male/female roles, presenting a king who ignores problems within his kingdom because of excessive devotion to his wife, Queen Sumitra. She is moved by the outbreak of famine to take military action against the provincial governors responsible for it. Her actions remind us of Antigone, who under penalty of death defies her uncle, King Creon, and performs burial rites for her rebel brother. But Queen Sumitra's commitment is to the welfare of her kingdom, not her family. Tagore reverses the traditional viewpoint consigning the primary responsibility of women to their families. The results, however, are disastrous, so we cannot be sure Tagore truly advocates reversal of the female role. The kingdom is plunged into civil war, as Queen Sumitra aligns with her brother against her own husband. This outcome demonstrates that subversion of the traditional hierarchy is dangerous.

Similar consequences occur as the result of the male/female conflict in *Sacrifice*, where a husband-wife quarrel is projected into a struggle between the authority of church and state. King Govinda decides to abolish animal sacrifice after seeing a distraught child lamenting the sacrifice of her pet goat in the temple. This unilateral decision pits him against his chief priest and wife. In Tagore's time, religion dominated politics. In this play, the effects of subverting the accepted hierarchy are as devastating as the projection of the male/female conflict in *The King and the Queen*. In a classic deconstructive twist, the decree designed to lessen bloodshed actually promotes it.

The premise that innocent blood will be shed when political or religious authorities act autocratically exists at the margins of the text, unstated, yet present by its absence. This presence by absence is defined by deconstructionists as "alterity," or non-presence. The goddess Kali, around whose "thirst for blood" (need for sacrifice) the play revolves, similarly exists beyond the boundaries of the text. In no instance does she speak during the play, but her influence upon the principals is profound. Her presence beyond but within the text meets the Derrida definition of a text without a true center. In deconstructionist criticism, the lack of center allows free play within the system. It permits a text to be "no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces..." (2). According to Derrida, the works of great writers necessarily go beyond the boundaries demarcated by their content. J. Hillis Miller expands this concept when he states that "great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics" (5), and will, in fact, anticipate "any deconstruction the critic can achieve."

Contemplate the goddess Kali—the ultimate binary opposition incorporated within a single entity. She is associated with both destruction (war and bloodshed) and creation

(fertility). She is represented as a black woman with four arms, the left hands holding a sword and the head of a slain demon, the right hands conferring knowledge and making the mudras of “fear not.” She symbolizes the necessity of accepting pain and sorrow in human existence and persuades humans to act fully in the moment, free of the fear of death. The conflict between King Govinda and Queen Gunavati erupts into a struggle over life and death. The purpose of the Queen’s animal sacrifice is to help her conceive a child. The purpose of the King’s abolishment of sacrifice is to spare the needless death of animals. The enigma of Kali and the paradoxes that surround her in the play epitomize the deconstructive idea of “différance.” According to Leitch (4), *différance* encompasses the following qualities: “1) ‘to differ’ – to be unlike in nature, quality or form, 2) ‘différer’ (Latin) to disperse or scatter, 3) ‘to defer’ – to postpone or delay.” *Différance* is, however, “neither a word nor a concept,” according to Derrida (3). It refers to the “origin or production of differences, and the differences between differences, the play of differences.” It is “the nonfull, nonsimple ‘origin;’ it is the structured and differing origin of differences.” Finally, it is the “subversion of every realm” that threatens to undermine all texts, because certain assumptions are made by the author or reader before (s)he ever begins writing or reading the text. *Différance* questions the source of these preconceived origins.

A similar analysis can be applied to the issue of divine revelation in *Sacrifice*. At some point in time, the goddess Kali required animal sacrifice in return for celestial favors. King Govinda claims to have received divine revelation to the contrary and states, “God’s words are above all laws.” Indeed all religious practices are based on commandments from divine authority, and the source of divine authority is revelation. The ability to receive revelation is claimed by an individual based on spiritual knowledge conferred upon the individual by the deity. King Govinda explains the basis for his decree thus: “Mother (Kali) came to me, in a girl’s disguise, and told me that blood she cannot suffer.” Man or woman becomes the mouthpiece for god, and the veracity of the source of the revelation cannot be determined. This is *différance*. The revelation becomes unstable because King Govinda cannot testify he has spoken directly to Kali and claims she was disinclined to the custom of sacrifice and “kept her face averted.” Not only is the origin of revelation in question, but revelation itself presents the notion of supplementarity. Derrida proposes that the specific case depends on the general case, but the general case is part of the specific. Supplementarity is an elusive concept existing at the center of binary oppositions. Religious laws rely on revelation received by select individuals and transmitted into law. God’s words are not above laws, as King Govinda states, they are laws. Revelation is law, and law is revelation. In *Of Grammatology* (1), Derrida explains supplementarity as follows:

“Supplementarity, which is nothing, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend.”

Lastly, I will consider the character of Jaising in *Sacrifice*. Jaising is a child servant to the chief priest and has lived in the temple since infancy. He is initially portrayed as a devotee of the goddess, but inconsistencies soon become apparent. He pledges to help the servant girl save her pet goat from sacrifice, against the wishes of his sacerdotal mentor and the goddess he worships. He appears to worship King Govinda (as his “full moon”) more devoutly than Kali, but offers to help the priest murder King Govinda to restore animal sacrifice in the temple. This brings about another contradiction, since he has promised the girl to rescue her goat. He cannot decide which authority is more compelling—man or god (another binary

opposition). The voice he hears from behind Kali's altar is identified by King Govinda as that of the priest, but whether that voice is Kali's or not, Jaising says, "It is all the same." At the end of the play, he kills himself to appease a goddess whom he has come to doubt. His actions present a paradox. He is innocent but wise beyond his years. He loves too much, or not enough. In his character is a shifting play of loyalties as diverse as the jungle.

This richness and potential for infinite free play are what attract literary critics to deconstruction as an analytical tool. Deconstruction provides them with endless opportunities to analyze and re-analyze great works of literature. It causes them to be skeptical about fixed interpretations and opens their minds to the ambiguities of literary texts. In the works of Tagore I have examined, it encourages more insightful analyses, answers questions, and raises new ones.

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