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Rabindranath Tagore

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Sexual Politics and Exploitation in Tagore's short story "Punishment"

Tagore's short stories, span almost six decades from the early 1880s to 1941, the year of his death. Sankar Basu in his critical study, *Chekhov and Tagore: A Comparative study of their Short Stories* states, "Tagore began writing his short stories at the same time as Chekhov, when this genre had yet to be properly formulated in Indian literature and was comparatively less known in the arena of world literature. (Quoted in Dasgupta et al. 105). Basu, in fact, quotes the Soviet critic A. P. Gnachuk-Danilchuk who had remarked, "It is interesting to note that Tagore laid the foundation of the genre of short stories in Bengali literature almost at the same time, when Maupassant and Chekhov wrote their stories, the period when in English literature this genre was not so developed (Quoted in Dasgupta et al. 105).

This paper aims at re-viewing Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Shasti" / "Punishment", written in July 1893 (Shravan 1300 bangabda) as a study in the politics of exploitation. There are two forms of discrimination in the story — that which exists between the landowners and the farmers, and that between men and women. Prof. Tapobrata Ghosh states that in *Samya*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay had referred to these two forms of discrimination as being prime reasons for violation of the social order. Both forms lead to two kinds of exploitation. Ghosh states that "the first can be referred to as economic exploitation, the second as social exploitation [translation mine]" (Ghosh 183). It would be interesting to refer to Engels' opinion that: "the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male", thus legitimating the familiar equation of the husbands with the bourgeoisie and wives with the proletariat. ... If male-female relations are construed in class terms, for instance, men are always the ruling class" (Ruthven 29). Tagore was well aware of the rebellion by the Socialists against economic exploitation that took place in the 19th century and of the resentment of European women against patriarchal standards. Two essays, one titled "Catholic Socialism" and the other "Socialism" appeared in January 1892 (Magh 1298 bangabda) and May 1892 (Jaishtha 1299 bangabda) in the