

Identity in Spirituality: A Review of the Play *Chandalika* by Tagore

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winner for literature, is the first excellent Indian author whose creative efforts—poetry, prose, drama—present a superb Triveni of, mysticism, humanism and philosophy. His significant dance play *Chandalika* reveals the theme of marginal(Dalit) voice and role of Buddhism in the play. The play displays a chandal girl's realization that she's a human being like any other and it's wrong for her to believe under the notice of people from the upper castes. This play is about awakening a feeling of her identity in a Chandal-woman, and its awakened realization that she was born as a chandal-woman does not imply she is a non-entity. Prakriti finds that she is as human as anyone else, and that she has the right to give water to anyone high or low who requests that. Chandal girl in this play realizes that she isn't just someone with a personal identity but also causes her to love a Buddhist monk who is accountable for this new awakening.

Key Words: Dance play, untouchability, identity, Spirituality, *Chandalika*

Introduction

Critics have noted Rabindranath Tagore's dance play as a social reflection. They have characterized so-called Dalit Chandal girl to be impressed by the love of monk. But the studies of impression and the affection as well as the spirituality are limited largely to his play. His dramas, which too are rich in social versus spirituality, have not received the kind of critical attention that these texts should have. This brief analysis of the much anthologized drama "*Chandalika*" seeks to fill in this critical gap. It makes the point that the use of the connection between spirituality and marginality in the play deconstructs the social condition of Chandal girl and her affinity displays the identity in relation to Buddhist Monk Ananda.

Introducing the author and the play

The drama is generally recognized as a favorable medium for reflecting societies, which is the prevalent stereotype "drama is a portrayal of life." The writers over the centuries have used this powerful attribute of drama to produce favorable remarks on cultural occurrences and so forth.

The noble prize winner for literature, Rabindranath Tagore, is Indian's first great writer, he reveals the superb junction of philosophy, mysticism and humanism in his creative efforts—poetry, prose, dramatic work. Tagore is a significant figure in the dramatic literature of Bengal and Bengali. Rabindranath Tagore was the first major Indian writer to present his poetry, prose and drama to the leading Triveni in philosophy, mystique and humanism. He is also the first Indian literature award winner. Tagore is considered to be an important individual in Bengali theater and dramatic literature. He has written a lot literary genre including the social plays. There are a wide variety of reasons, subjects, constructions, language and social and religious solutions in all the plays. His disagreements were more radical and consistent, making him an appalling critic of social practices and religion, including the denunciation of the caste system.

Tagore utilizes the form of dance; slightly nuanced in his dance dramas—where dance becomes itself a liberating force—it is both a freeing expression and the expression of women's identity and self-assertion. In addition, he incorporates the "other" dance languages which had not only roots in national, but also in a transnational culture, with Indigenous Indian dancing both as a classic and the folk. Likewise, Tagore's vision separated the dance movement both from the actor and from the performance the halo of purity and strong spirituality of classical dance. It brought dance and the

dancer nearer to the crowd and brought them into pedagogy. By showing the social and religious arena the writer mixes-up the marginality and the spirituality where the character searches: the human identity and the 'self'. Tagore presents the contemporary cast-system especially in Hinduism.

Chandalika (1933) is his best known piece based on Buddhist legend. The story is based on "Sardulkarna Abadan" in R.L. Mitra's *Buddhist literature on the Sanskrit Nepal*. The preface to his play is summarized by Tagore:

The location of the story is Sravasti. Lord Buddha had been staying at the time in the garden of Anathpindad. One day his favourite disciple Ananda, while on his way back from lunch at some house, felt thirsty. He saw that a girl, Prakriti by name, drawing water from the well. He asked for water, she gave. The girl becomes charmed at his beauty. Finding no other way to have him, she sought help from her mother. Her mother knew magic she smeared her courtyard with cow dung, prepared an altar, and lighted fire. Ananda could not resist the power of magic and arrived at her house in the night. As he sat on the altar Prakriti began to spread the bed for him. Then Ananda felt remorse and tearfully prayed to Buddha to rescue him. Lord Buddha had meantime come to know by means of his divine power of the condition of his disciple and cited a mantra. Under the impact of that mantra the magic spell of the Chandal woman become weak and Ananda returned to the monastery. (Kundu R. 2004:234).

The original story emphasizes the orthodox idea of the superiority of the monk and the lure of lustful women .The ancient story has a sublimation of the impact in the tale of Tagore. Tagore employs the legend to make individuals aware of untouchability by concentrating on Prakriti's anguish about humiliation due to her 'low' birth. Tagore's *Chandalika* ,Prakriti's is different to the original, in this play Prakriti herself realizes that she cannot tolerate the degradation of a great person.

Methodology

Identity is the most debated term since ancient period but it is especially flourished when there starts the postcolonial literature. The social, historical, cultural and ideological circumstances prevalent in the alien and native societies trap the protagonists. They become victims of cultural biasness, despair and loneliness as they feel the people around them asking them, 'Who are you? Where are you from? Why are you here?' The confusion of the protagonists caused by social injustice results the identity crisis. Coulmas establishes, "Identity is a multi-layered dynamic process rather than an inborn trait that cannot be helped. Identities are partly given and partly made"(178).Prakariti feels social alienation. Social alienation is "the sense of estrangement brought out by the sudden discovery that the social system is either oppressive or incomplete with the individual's desires and ideals" (Taviss47).

Analysis of style and technique

It's a short drama in two parts with just three protagonists—Prakriti, her mother and Ananda. Prakriti and the mother constitute the marginalized human world that is in conflict with Ananda's spiritual world. With a divine preaching of equality, the legendary Buddhist monk, Ananda, opens Prakriti's blind and oppressed mind and makes her conscious of her 'self.' Prakriti then becomes a rebellious symbol of this world of rooted cast system of Indian society. But soon, she crosses the religious and ethical limits of the established social norms and wishes to marry the very monk to reveal her awakened worldly existence. Her mother, still under the spell of caste-suppression, fears the worst, but undoubtedly yields to her daughter's entreaties and tries to help her cause by eventually using her magical abilities to sacrifice her own life. Thus the inner life of these three characters is a battlefield between ethics morality and worldly wishes.

The play starts at Prakriti and her mother's conflict over the subject of Prakriti's inspiration to Ananda as a living, breathing human being and not as an untouchable, disgraceful, socially neglected chandalini. His magical words, 'Give me water,' addressed to the scared girl, considerably negate her orthodox feeling of being an outcaste. A holy person in those days was totally unheard of asking for water from an untouchable. It was believed to be a breakdown of the code of conduct, both in the prospective of social and religious. It was culturally insensitive for both—the monk and the untouchable to receive and give food or water. Therefore, in the play, the 'water act' introduces the freedom of the untouchable from the unjust bondage of slavery of the usual prison of marginality. This oppressive custom inevitably leads to a new human being full of vitality, excitement and revolt.

Now Prakriti's enlightened mind refuses to acknowledge the ancient humiliating Hindu cannon. For her, "a religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags" (Tagore, 1970: 154).Ananda's preaching creates a change in her attitude and she feels awakened to a new life—a life in which she is not a Chandal but a human being on par with the world, even with the holy person. With her mother, she claims:

“Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but *I* am no slave; plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, but *I* am no Chandal” (152). Dr. Ambedkar, the contemporary social reformer and the downtrodden's messiah (guru), once said to have remarked: 'Make the slave conscious of his slavery, and he would revolt.' Something similar happens to the untouchable Prakriti. The 'free mind' now fires in her heart the feelings of Ananda's love and desire. Excited by emotions of liberty, she revolts at the old shackles of marginality put on her 'self' by religion and society in order to show her equal status. Now she decides to unite with the very person who liberated this 'self.' The scholar of Tagore, Agarwal, claims: “Caste is a man-made institution confined to transitory ends. It can neither strengthen nor spoil the dignity of marriage” (Agarwal 87). Prakriti now requests the Buddhist monk to be attached to her.

This is an absurd concept for the world's moral and ethical cannons since the Buddhist monks strictly obey the vow of silence in their pursuit of 'nirvana' and are therefore beyond the reach of any common person in terms of worldly pleasures and family duties. AzizunNahar Islam, the famous scholar of Bangladeshi, rightly comments: “The Buddha pointed the changes, vicissitudes and tragedies of life. He condemns the charms and temptations of body” (Islam 96). Accordingly, the divine vow of silence and rigid morality connects every Buddhist monk. The ordinary people, in turn, are amazed at their holiness and therefore respect their divinity. But, blindfolded by the awakened consciousness of freedom and overpowered by the newly emerging need for equality and spiritual union, Prakriti goes beyond this morality and ethical limits. That results in her spiritual tragedy in the end. K.R. Kripalani calls it a ‘tragedy of self-consciousness overreaching its limit’. (Tagore, 1970: 145). His further comments about the response of Chandalika point to the disadvantage of such extremes when he says: “But self-consciousness, like good wine, easily intoxicates, and it is difficult to control the dose and have just enough of it.” (167).

In the play, Prakriti loses all sense of fear in her newly awakened state for holiness and social and religious codes of behavior. She therefore says: “I fear nothing any longer, except to sink back again, to forget myself again, to enter again the house of darkness. *That* would be worse than death!” (153). She then forgets that Ananda does not exercise her passions as a normal human being, but as a divinely mortal worker for the betterment of the dignity of humankind: “I'll send my call into his soul, for him to hear. I am longing to give myself; it is like a pain at my heart” (152). This pain of longing for the lovely and magnificent monk becomes even more intense when, later in the play during her second opportunity of quoting him, Ananda, immersed in her inner spiritual self, completely ignores her presence and goes on chanting the hymn of Lord Buddha. That crash-lands her worldly longing illusionary flight. It is a great shock to her sensitive mind. Her female ego is crushed and she feels deeply affected by the newly awakened woman. So in anger, she commands her mother to throw her 'magical spell' on Ananda's masculine core to force him to beg for marrying her. Thus, for neglecting the urge of the previously marginalized individual, she could sate her emotions of revenge on the entire manhood of the earth.

This is a sensational twist to Ananda's legend's dramatic rendering. It now becomes a beautiful and studious depiction of Tagore's woman psychology. The dramatist seems to be conscious of the general opinion that a woman, trying to give everything to a man, can go to any extreme if her female pride is hurt. “Her extreme anxiety to possess the monk is the external manifestation of her latent desire to offer her best” (Agarwal 91). But Ananda is too far from accepting her offering from these worldly desires. So in any religious or social ethics, Prakriti has no other alternatives than resorting to violent means that are unacceptable. She claims: “If my longing can draw him here, and if that is a crime, then I will commit the crime. I care nothing for a code which holds only punishment, and no comfort” (Tagore, 1970: 155).

Prakriti therefore aims to evoke similar lust in the unresponsive heart of her attraction with somebody. However, fulfilling her daughter's unworldly requirement becomes a mental torture for the mother. Usually bound in the caste web of her orthodox temperament, she can not commit such a religious and social sin to force a Buddhist monk to break his celibacy, nor can she tolerate the outrage of her only daughter. She is scared that if she committed the sin of pushing the holy monk into sexual immorality, it would carry a curse on the unhappy girl and certain death for herself. If she was finished halfway, the spell would destroy her even then. Thus, she attempts to instill some practical meaning into Prakriti's enraged head. But blind in vengeance, she pays no heed to the stubborn girl and forces her mother to sing the 'magical spell' to take her Ananda full of lust.

This conflict is further weakened by the second part of the drama. Prakriti's mom operates her magical spell on meditating Ananda, who stays in his spiritual happiness at his abode. This magical spell affects the holy man as designed and torments his pure heart. Never had such a thing was happening to him in his religiously dedicated life. He is furiously trying to shake off this 'woman's desire' but in vain. Now the water of intense sexual urge extinguishes the religious light that adorned his divinely beautiful face. Ananda's desire for a female is completely against the notion of Buddhism, which prohibits her Bhikshus from indulging in such worldly pleasures connected with ordinary people. However,

the 'magical pull' practiced by Prakriti's mother on Ananda is so powerful that the renowned ascetic practice of the Buddha is at risk in this situation. In the enormous strength of the 'magic chants' of the old woman, the control that Ananda attempts to practice on his moral self-recedes. Therefore, unconsciously and helplessly, he tries to cool his newly awakened sensuous emotions all the way from his Monsoon meditation house at Vaisali to Prakriti's residence in Sravasti. This is a victory of the marginalized womanhood of Prakriti against the monk's strict religious beliefs.

But this victory of the marginalized girl, however, remains short lived. When Ananda is at her home's threshold, she is terrified by the change in him brought about by the magic of her mother. Light, radiance, and shiny purity have disappeared from Ananda's lovely and serene face because of the overwhelming sexual desire in him that was awakened by the spell of the mother. He appears totally worn out, faded, and without the glow of heaven. He doesn't even look like the holy monk she wanted to marry. In reality, because of the agony of spiritual pain she did not anticipate, he emerged as an animal twisted in womanly lust and under severe suffering. Prakriti strikes beyond her faith in his hideous face. She realizes in shock her mistake and the sin she committed in her blind rage. She asked for forgiveness, stopped her mother from further exercising the spell, begged Ananda's forgiveness and fell at his feet. As a result, the magical spell that has tormented the monk's pure heart so far breaks into normalcy. Also, the mother begging forgiveness dies at the holy man's feet. And Ananda returns with unchanged spirituality, chanting the name of the purest Buddha.

Chandalika, therefore, tends to be a chronicle of the Buddha's disciple and his divinity. The Hindu notion of caste differentiation based on birth is undoubtedly inhuman. It should be totally wiped out and equality blended with humanity should be established. However, some moral and ethical restrictions should also be exercised by newly empowered human beings for the better functioning of the social order. This could be the idea of Rabindranath Tagore in dramatizing the Buddhist monk Ananda legend through *Chandalika*. In the words a new consciousness after ages of suppression is overpowering and one learns restraint only after suffering. This is what happens to Chandalika's protagonist. At the end of her tragic experience, Prakriti, the Chandal girl, realizes the need for ethical principles in her new birth. She ultimately corrected the error in overhauling her previous human ethic and eventually turned a better and more spiritual females' struggles to be a worthy example in the caste system.

Conclusion

The short play *Chandalika* tells a very exciting tale that holds our attention from beginning to end and actually holds us spell-bound. However, the play involves several situations, each of which captures our attention. At the same time, the initial situation itself is very interesting and highly instructive. The Buddhist monks are asking for water to quench their thirst, the Chandal girl's fear of providing water to a person brings the conflict into her mind and with her social status, she dares not to touch, the Bhikshu's advice not to humiliate herself with a sense of inferiority, and the Chandal girl's realization of her human identity — this is the original condition; and it certainly arouses not only our interest but also our sympathy for the girl and our admiration for the monk who believed in the equality of all human beings and not in any caste-system. Here we are inevitably reminded of the life of Mahatma Gandhi—a long campaign against untouchability. The circumstances that follow are similarly interesting and equally instructive and illuminating. Not only Prakriti started thinking of herself as a human being, but she also fell in love with the Buddhist monk who gave her a new understanding of herself. And then a new aspect comes into the story when the girl urges her mother to use magic power to take the Buddhist monk back to her house. Each situation gives rise to an enthusiastic willingness in us to understand what would happen next. In other words, a sense of suspense is developed in our minds at almost every point in the advancement of the story.

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