

## ***Chandalika: An Aesthetic Exploration of Marginalised Experience***

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**Abstract:** *Rabindranath Tagore, a major voice of awakening in the Indian Renaissance, has transformed an ancient Buddhist legend into a dance drama, Chandalika, which depicts the contemporary issue of class consciousness and the prevalent spiritual crisis in the society. The dance drama powerfully presents the intense desire of a marginalized woman who desperately wants to possess the man from the mainstream who happens to treat her as a social equal. The paper proposes to appreciate Tagore's aesthetic exploration into the psyche of a socially ostracized woman who has experienced a strange sense of fulfilment on being treated as a normal human being. An attention is drawn towards the integration of ethical values into the response pattern of the marginalized experience. However, the universal appeal of Chandalika substantiates the greatness of Tagore's artistic acumen which has raised it above a polemic of protest.*

**Key Words:** *Dance-drama, Aesthetic, Marginalized, Ethical, Buddhist Legend.*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is a major voice of awakening in the Indian Renaissance. As a poet, playwright, philosopher, educationist, thinker and social reformer, Tagore crosses the constraints of time and space. Appreciating Tagore's relevance today, Kenneth R. Stunkel opines, "Tagore was and still is .....a major presence in world literature.....He remains a literary force". (Stunkel: 237-259) The volume, variety and nature of subject matters that Tagore has dealt with establish him as a voice that will never cease to have relevance across decades and physical boundaries. In the contemporary *dalit* discourse in the Indian English literature *Chandalika* has a special relevance because of its spiritual perspective. In fact, this dance drama has been performed and staged in many languages with multiple interpretations across the country and overseas which proves the universal appeal of the aesthetically rich literary work with a socio-cultural stance. It is in this sense that the present article proposes to consider *Chandalika*, as an aesthetic expression of the issues of caste consciousness and spiritual conflict prevalent in our society.

Tagore has transformed an ancient Buddhist legend for this dance drama in order to deal with the contemporary issue of class consciousness and the prevalent spiritual crisis in the society. In the Buddhist legend, Ananda, the famous disciple of the Buddha, approaches a well to ask for water from a chandalini, a young untouchable girl. The young chandalini serves him water from her pitcher and falls in love with him at the first sight. Her passion to possess Ananda tempts her to compel her mother to cast a magic spell on Ananda and to drag him to her house. Under the spell Ananda is dragged to the couch spread for him by the chandalini. Ananda, terrified with his

carnal desires, prays to the Buddha to save him from shame and remorse. Consequently, Buddha breaks the magic spell and frees Ananda, who walks away from the chandalini, as pure as he came. In *Chandalika*, Tagore has treated the legend in a highly imaginative way with a modernist interpretation. The Buddhist legend is about the lust of the marginalised woman for the bhikshu – Ananda and the conflicts it generated for him. The fact of social discrimination was just incidental to the legend and the climax lay in the transformation of the woman into a bhikshuni by the Buddha.

In Tagore's dance drama, Prakriti emerges as the central protagonist – a marginalised figure of Hindu society discriminated against or ostracized for her social background in a caste-segregated world view. By addressing the theme of untouchability through this dance drama Tagore made an extremely bold socio-political statement against the discrimination of untouchables in 1933 which is still relevant in the socio-politico-cultural scenario of modern India. Tagore's deep concern with the notion of untouchability, an evil curse on the Indian society, is also evident in his *Gitanjali*. His concern against social discrimination becomes even more pronounced in the novel *Gora*. In his essay "Mahatmaji and the Oppressed Humanity", Tagore has eloquently drawn attention to this evil practice inflicting a despicable blot in the social fabric of India.

A dungeon does not solely consist of brick and mortar, and setting narrow limits to man's self respect is a moral prison more cruel for victims than the physical one... inequalities between individuals and races cannot be ignored, and to accept these as absolute and utilise these to deprive man of their human rights and comradeship is a social crime that multiplies fast in its heinousness. (Tagore, 1932: 323-340)

The dialogue between Prakriti and her mother sums up the past and the present history of untouchability and the complexities of the deep scars left by such exclusion:

Mother: Be warned, Prakriti, these men's words are meant only to be heard, not to be practised. The filth into which an evil fate has cast you is a wall of mud that no spade in the world can break through. You are unclean; beware of tainting the whole outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your own place, narrow as it is. To stay anywhere beyond its limits, is to trespass.

Prakriti: A religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer. I am afraid of nothing now. (150)

In *Chandalika*, Prakriti's obsession with Ananda is not borne out of a physical lust, but the intense desire of a marginalised woman to fervently possess a man from the mainstream who treats her as an equal. For her, Ananda embodies liberation, a person who has shown a way out of the stultifying darkness of self relegation. Prakriti now desperately wants to possess the man who

has given her the taste of freedom from the chains of social degradation that bound her soul. She has a sense of strange fulfilment.

My mind is saying it over and over again – fulfilled! It was for this that I heard those wonderful words, “Give me water”. Today I know that even I can give. Everyone also had hidden the truth from me. I sit and watch for his coming today to give, to give, to give everything I have. (153-154)

The trance that Prakriti experiences when treated as an equal has been powerfully presented through intense language:

I may truly call it my new birth! ... My heart has been dancing ever since, and night and day I hear those solemn tones ... “Give me water, give me water.” (149)

As a refrain ‘water’ emerges as a symbol, a force that washes out social dogma and stigmatization in the cultural tradition of India. Thus Prakriti celebrates:

Only once did he cup his hands to take the water from mine. Such a little water, yet that water grew to a fathomless, boundless sea. In it flowed all the seven seas in one, and my caste was drowned, and my birth washed clean. (148-149)

By giving water to the thirsty monk, it is as if Prakriti has satisfied her own thirst for self-respect. Ananda has given her the power to serve others, the power to give life (water), nourishment to thirsty travellers. It is in her eyes that Prakriti has seen herself as an equal to all the other human beings. She now gains an understanding of her selfhood; an awareness of her identity as a woman, a human being and an acknowledgement of her self-worth. This realization of Prakriti’s selfhood is intermingled with the conscious negation of her socially imposed caste and class as well as an acknowledgement of herself as a woman proud of her self-worth. This realization makes her question the very concept of the ‘Brahmin’ and the ‘Chandal’:

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)

The text of the drama poetically engages in a powerful polemic against self-abnegation and a fervent plea for social regeneration:

Mother: Did you tell him that you are a chandalini?

Prakriti: I told him, yes. He said it wasn’t true. If the black clouds of Sravana are dubbed chandal, he said, what of it? It doesn’t change their nature, or destroy the virtue of their water. Don’t humiliate yourself, he said; self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder.” (197-198)

The reformative zeal of the artist gets an aesthetic expression in the analogy of caste and the 'black clouds of sravana'. The poet-philosopher questions the irrational matrix of caste-system which is still a scar in the face of humanity.

Sunder Sarukkai argues that untouchability denigrates the dalit as a 'supplement' to the society, defined in terms of incompleteness and a lack of selfhood. (Sarukkai: 39-48) Thus, expressing in terms of Sarukkai, Ananda effectively removes Prakriti's status as a 'supplement' asserting her 'complete' existence in the society. Obviously, Tagore's Prakriti never seeks Ananda out as a possession guided by lust. For her, Ananda is the only agent that testifies her equality:

You call me daring? Think of the might of his daring! How simply he spoke the words which no one had ever dared to say to me before! "Give me water". Such little words, yet as mighty as flame." (155)

This fact has been further emphasized by an effective differentiation between her desire for Ananda from the desire that the King's son displayed for her as an object of lust and her rejection of that desire. Prakriti has made a conscious decision. She clarifies her mother's doubt who is unable to understand her daughter's adamant behaviour because Prakriti had once refused the 'chance' to be a queen:

Prakriti: Yes, he had forgotten everything – forgotten that I was a human being. He had gone out hunting beasts; he saw nothing but the beast, whom he wanted to bind in chains of gold. (151)

Undeterred by mother's warning Prakriti dares to brave the world. Tagore's heroine declares:" Let everyone marvel at my daring" (151-152). Her passion for Ananda is more than a woman's physical desire. She revolts against her ostracized existence:

Prakriti: I fear nothing any longer, except to sink back again, to enter again the hour of darkness. *That* could be worse than death."

Amidst the articulation of the indomitable passion of Prakriti for the ascetic, her inner conflict is also revealed through her dialogues neatly crafted with metaphors and symbols. Prakriti's argument for the union with Ananda, "Will he not mingle his longings with mine, as the Ganges mingles with the black waters of Jumna?"(152) Tagore empowers his heroine to challenge the repressive caste-ridden world where her identity and desire are downplayed. The dramatist makes her challenge both her desire and destiny - the desire for her ideal man and the destiny of being a chandalini:

Mother: Why do you get so excited, child? You were born slave. It's the writ of Destiny, who can undo it?

Prakriti: Fie, fie, Mother, I tell you again, don't delude yourself with this self-humiliation- it is false, and a sin. Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but *I am no* Chandal. (152)

The crucial moment in the play where Ananda, immersed in chanting religious hymns, passes by without recognising her, she is stung by the memories of rejection and ostracization:

This is dust, this dust is your place. O wretched woman, who raised you to bloom for a moment in the light? Fallen in the end into this same dust,... He showed no pity to me, I shall show none to him....His dry meditations will scatter like withered leaves; his lamp will go out, his path will be lost in darkness ...the thunder throbs in my heart, my mind is filled with the lightening flash...make him come right to my bosom. After that, I will blot out all his suffering, emptying my whole world at his feet. (159)

Amrit Sen convincingly points out that possessing Ananda becomes a desperate validation of her new birth, her awareness of her dignity and equality (Sen: 27). The legendary Buddhist monk, Ananda, opens the blind and subjugated mind of Prakriti with a divine preaching of equality and makes her aware of her 'self'. Prakriti then becomes a symbol of revolt against this age-old malady of the Indian society. But in her obsession to possess Ananda, Prakriti makes an erroneous choice. She oversteps the religious and ethical boundaries of the established social norms and desires to copulate with the very monk to prove her awakened worldly existence. Her mother, still under the darkness of caste-discrimination, fears the worst, but eventually yields to the entreaties of her daughter. She tries to support her cause by using her sorcery skills ultimately sacrificing her own life.

There is an aesthetic exploration of the conflict between Prakriti's desire for Ananda and his attempt to cling to his religious vow. In the process, the inner lives of these three characters become a battlefield of a conflict between the ethics of morality and worldly desires. The second part of the drama further extenuates this conflict. Prakriti's mother works her magical spell upon the meditating Ananda who is content in his spiritual bliss. The magical power of Maya, Prakriti's mother, plays havoc with the pure heart of the holy man. He tries unsuccessfully to shake off this "desire for woman". The spiritual illumination which adorned his divinely beautiful face is now tarnished by the intense sexual urge. This yearning for woman by Ananda is entirely against the concept of Buddhism which forbids its bhikshus to indulge in such worldly pleasures. However, the 'magical pull' exercised by Prakriti's mother upon Ananda is so strong that the Buddha's 'ascetic practice' is at stake. The enormous power of Maya's 'magic chants' overpowers Ananda's struggles to exercise control upon his moral self. Helplessly, he trudges to Prakriti's residence to quench his newly awakened sensual desires. It appears that this moment is the victory of Prakriti's worldly desires against the rigid spiritual-moral values of the monk. But true to the spirit of a great work of art, Tagore does not make Ananda and Prakriti meet, making

the chasm to exist as it does even today. Several critics have complained against *Chandalika* as an unfinished project on the theme of caste-discrimination. In fact there is no simplistic solution to the age-old problems of caste-system in the Indian society. Instead, the play effectively sensitises the social issue endemic to our society.

The victory of the marginalized girl is short-lived. When Ananda is at the threshold of her home, she is horrified at the change in him resulting from the magic spell:

Prakriti: Where is the light and radiance, the shining purity, the heavenly glow?  
How worn, how faded, has he come to my door! (165)

He appeared like an animal twisted in sexual desire and under intense suffering due to the agony of spiritual pain which she did not anticipate. The shocking, ugly face makes Prakriti realize her mistake and the sin she had committed in her blind rage. The repentant Prakriti and her mother beg forgiveness from Ananda and fall at his feet. The broken magic spell claims the mother's life and liberates the tormented soul of the monk. Ananda returns, chanting the name of the Buddha, to his usual self with untainted spirituality. At last Prakriti also gets her spiritual comfort.

The action of the play clearly suggests that Prakriti's tragedy is one of an intense lack of security that blinds her to the consequences of her action on Ananda. It was Tagore's literary genius that introduced dance drama as a potential tool for defying the regressive yet accepted norms of the society. The indigenous form of theatrical representation makes the play a far more evocative representation of and protest against untouchability. The 'dancing body' becomes a symbol of mobility, resistance and autonomy. Through her dance movements the chandalika i.e. Prakriti articulates her anguish, anger and love. Anger, against the social status imposed upon her making her feel shackled for life; and love, for a monk who respects and acknowledges her as a human being. In a battle of magical chants and spiritual power, Prakriti comes to a conclusion that love can never be forced or possessed. The intensity of music and extensive lyricism in the drama capture the subtler nuances of the crisis of identity and conflict within Prakriti. The evocation of the Buddhist hymn subtly underlines the suffering that untouchability has wrought on the victims of irrational social divisions as Buddhism holds equality of human beings as a basic tenet of faith.

Amrit Sen rightly points out that the dance drama "transformed a moment of protest into a haunting dissection of the crisis of identity and personality that a social curse can inflict upon an individual."(Sen: 99) It is the triumph of art that *Chandalika* rises above a plain rhetoric of protest and emerges as an aesthetic exploration into the psyche of the ostracized, thereby sensitising the society towards the curse of this evil. Prakriti's intense desire to possess him and thereby relive her new birth is a moment of desperation that effectively communicates the depth of despair in such a situation. S.R.Sharma writes: "Against the abomination of untouchability he, of course, wrote his moving play *Chandalika*. Since that abomination continues with us, in fact assuming formidable proportions not so infrequently, the play acquires new relevance". (Sharma:

51) No doubt, the inhumanity of caste-discrimination should be replaced with a more humane social order, but some moral and ethical restraints should also be exercised by the newly awakened human beings. In the words of K.R.Kripalani: “.....a new consciousness after ages of suppression is overpowering and one learns restraint only after suffering”. (Kripalani: 243-146). At the end of her tragic experience, Prakriti realises the necessity of ethical values in her new birth. Eventually, she corrects the mistake of overhauling the human ethics she had committed earlier and turns a better and spiritually conscious woman in the end. The suggestion is quite relevant in the society suffering from cultural and spiritual crisis in the face of the challenged traditional social order and the consequent reactionary caste-strife fuelled by selfish political ambitions. With an unparalleled genius, the artist has effectively amalgamated the theme of spiritual conflict and spiritual liberation with the theme of emancipation from the scourge of untouchability.

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