

Marginality Vs Spirituality: A Thematic Review of Tagore's Play *Chandalika*

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A Brahma-Hindu Rabindranath Tagore had a lasting regard for the Buddha. The rational and humanistic aspects of the teachings of the Buddha had attracted the creative genius of Tagore since his earlier days. "Only once in his life, said Rabindra Nath, did he feel like prostrating himself before an image and that was when he saw the Buddha at Gaya" (Maksud Syed). He found the Buddhist principle of man's social equality particularly alluring to his own concept of 'divinity in man'. *Chandalika* is a dramatic expression of this ideology. The play is a visual presentation of the age-old struggle of the marginalized section of Indian society to attain the status of equality. It is based on a Buddhist legend associated with one of the Buddha's disciples named Ananda. In this legend, Tagore found readymade material for the propagation of this idea of equality and humanism through an intense conflict between marginality and spirituality. The play is also a criticism of the worst vice of the Vedic religion, namely, casteism. John Wilson, in his celebrated work, *Indian Caste* Volume One, observes: "Buddhism in its most important social aspect was a reaction against Caste, the tyranny of which multitudes had begun to feel to be unbearable. . ." (Wilson, 1877: 278).

It is a short drama in two parts with just three characters – Prakriti, her Mother and Ananda. Prakriti and the mother represent the marginalized human world who are in conflict with the spiritual world of Ananda. 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. Soon, however, she oversteps the religious and ethical boundaries of the established social norms and desires to wed the very monk to prove her awakened worldly existence. Her mother, still under the spell of caste-suppression, fears the worst, but eventually yields to the entreaties of her daughter and tries to aid her cause by using her magical skills sacrificing her own life in the end. In the process, the inner life of these three characters becomes a battlefield of a conflict between the ethics of morality and worldly desires.

The play begins at the confrontation of Prakriti and her Mother over the topic of Ananda's inspiration of Prakriti as a living, breathing human being and not as an untouchable, despicable, socially neglect chandalini. His magical words – 'Give me water' – addressed to the frightened girl, significantly negate her orthodox sense of being an outcaste. A holy man asking for water from an untouchable was completely unheard of in those days. It was thought to be a violation of the social as well as religious code of conduct. To receive and to give food or water were sacrilegious for both – the monk and the untouchable. In the play, therefore, the 'water act' presents the untouchable's liberation from the unjust bondage of slavery of the customary prison of marginality. A new human being full of vitality, exuberance and revolt from this oppressive custom is born.

The enlightened mind of Prakriti now refuses to accept the age-old humiliating cannons of Hindu religion. 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, brings a sea-change in her attitude and she feels awakened to a new life – a life where she is no Chandal but a human being on par with the world, even with the holy man. She argues with her mother: “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 modern social reformer and messiah of the downtrodden, is once said to have remarked: ‘Make aware the slave of his slavery, and he would revolt’. Similar thing happens with the untouchable Prakriti. The ‘free mind’ now fires the emotions of love and desire for Ananda in her heart. Excited by the feelings of liberty and to prove her equal status, she revolts against the age-old shackles of the marginality put upon her ‘self’ by the religion and society. She now decides to get united with the very person who had liberated this ‘self’. The Tagore scholar, Agarwal, says: “Caste is a man-made institution confined to transitory ends. It can neither strengthen nor spoil the dignity of marriage” (Agarwal 87). Now, Prakriti demands for her coupling with the Buddhist hermit.

This is an outrageous idea for the moral and ethical cannons of the world since the Buddhist monks in their pursuit of ‘nirvana’ follow the vow of celibacy strictly and so are beyond the reach of any common individual in terms of worldly pleasures and familial obligations. The well-known Bangladeshi academic and religion scholar, Azizun Nahar Islam, rightly remarks: “The Buddha pointed the changes, vicissitudes and tragedies of life. He condemns the charms and temptations of body” (Islam 96). Accordingly, every Buddhist monk is bound by the divine vow of celibacy and strict morality. In turn, the common folks are in awe of their holiness and, therefore, respect their divinity. But, blindfolded by the awakened consciousness of liberty and overpowered by the freshly sprung need of equality and spiritual union, Prakriti oversteps this morality and ethical boundaries. 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 remarks regarding Chandalika’s reaction point out to the drawback in 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” (ibid.). In the play, Prakriti loses all sense of fear for the holiness and social and religious codes of conduct in her newly awakened state. Hence, she declares: “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). In doing so, she forgets that Ananda is not an ordinary human being to exercise her passions upon but a divine mortal working for the cause of upliftment of human dignity. She says to her mother: “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 beautiful and magnificent monk becomes even more intense when, later in the play during her second chance citing of him, Ananda, immersed in his inner spiritual self, totally ignores her presence and moves on chanting the hymn of Lord Buddha. That crash-lands her illusionary flight of worldly longing. It is a great shock to her sensitive mind. Her female ego gets crushed and the newly awakened woman feels deeply hurt. So in rage, she orders her mother to cast her ‘magical spell’ on the male heart of Ananda to force him to beg

for her conjugal company. That way she could satiate her feelings of revenge upon the entire manhood of the earth for neglecting the urge of the hitherto marginalized individual.

This is a sensational twist to the dramatic rendering of Ananda legend. It now becomes a wonderful and studious portrayal of female psychology by Tagore. The dramatist seems to be aware of the general belief that a woman, longing to give away 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 removed from these worldly desires to accept her offering. So Prakriti has no other options but to resort to violent means unacceptable in any religious or social ethics. She asserts: "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).

Therefore, Prakriti intends on rousing similar lust in her enamour's unresponsive heart. However, it is a mental torture for the mother to fulfill this unworldly demand of her daughter. Conventionally bound in the caste web of her orthodox temperament, she neither can commit such a religious and social sin to force a Buddhist monk to break his celibacy nor can she tolerate her only daughter's outrageous demand. She is afraid that it would bring a curse upon the unhappy girl and certain death for her own self, if committed the sin of forcing the holy monk to fornication. If undone halfway, even then, the spell would kill her. Therefore, she tries to instill some practical sense into the enraged head of Prakriti. But blind in revenge, the stubborn girl pays no heed and forces her mother to chant the 'magical spell' to bring Ananda full of lust to her.

The second part of the drama further extenuates this conflict. Prakriti's mother works her magical spell upon the meditating Ananda who is resting at his abode in his spiritual bliss. As intended, this magical spell does affect the holy man and torments his pure heart. Never in his religiously devoted life had such a thing happened to him. He tries furiously to shake off this 'desire for woman' but to no avail. The religious light which adorned his divinely beautiful face is now extinguished by the water of 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 associated with ordinary folks. However, the 'magical pull' exercised by Prakriti's mother upon Ananda is so strong that, in this case, the Buddha's renowned ascetic practice is at stake. The control that Ananda tries to exercise upon his moral self recedes in the enormous power of the old woman's 'magic chants'. Therefore, unconsciously and helplessly, he trudges all the way from his Monsoon meditation abode at Vaisali to Prakriti's residence in Sravasti to cool his newly awakened sensuous feelings. That is a victory of Prakriti's marginalized womanhood against the rigid spiritual morals of the monk.

But this victory of the marginalized girl, however, remains short lived. When Ananda is at the threshold of her home, she is horrified at the change in him brought about by her mother's magic. The light, radiance and the shining purity has vanished from the beautiful and serene face of Ananda due to the overpowering sexual desire in him awakened by the mother's spell. He appears to her completely worn out, faded and without heavenly glow. He

does not even look like the revered monk whom she earnestly wanted to wed. In fact, he appeared like an animal twisted in womanly desire and under intense suffering due to the agony of spiritual pain which she did not anticipate. His ugly face strikes Prakriti beyond her belief. In shock, she realizes her mistake and the sin she had committed in her blind rage. Repenting, she stops her mother from further exercising the spell, begs forgiveness from Ananda and falls at his feet. As a consequence, the magical spell, which so far tormented the pure heart of the monk, breaks to normalcy. The mother, too, begging forgiveness, dies at the feet of the holy man. And Ananda returns, chanting the name of the most pure Buddha, to his usual self with untainted spirituality.

Chandalika, thus, looks like, apparently, a chronicle of the Buddha's disciple and his divinity. However, Tagore's introduction of the psychological revolt, against the age-old caste suppression overreaching its limits and resulting in tragedy, lends it a new meaning. 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 .92).

No doubt, the Hindu concept of caste distinction based on one's birth is inhuman. It should be completely wiped out and equality tinged with humanity should be established. This is the order of the day. Yet, for the better functioning of the social order, some moral and ethical restraints should also be exercised by the newly awakened human beings. This could be the idea of Tagore in dramatizing the Ananda legend through *Chandalika*. In the words of K.R. Kripalani: ". . . a new consciousness after ages of suppression is overpowering and one learns restraint only after suffering" (Tagore, 1970: 145). That's what happens to the protagonist of *Chandalika*. Prakriti, the Chandal girl, in the end of her tragic experience, 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 spiritual woman in the end, an example worth to follow in the modern world full of casteist strife.

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