

## Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika*: An Ascetic Outlook of Subalternity

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### ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial, Indian society has been neglecting and detaching the marginalized section of society, labeling them as subhuman untouchables. Spivak in her lecture "The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work" describes Subalternity as "the position without identity". Although, representation of subaltern studies was little-known in Tagore's time, but his plays like *Chandalika*, *Natir Puja* and *Milan* narrate the evidence of subaltern remonstrance against upper class hegemony. The paper will aim to retrospect Tagore's *Chandalika* from Subaltern standpoint. It will investigate Tagore's ideal of humanitarianism and Universalism, the way he unites a more optimistic dimension, exploring the techniques of redemption and giving a strong espousal to Buddhism which is known for its liberal religious gamut. With reference to the notion of 'subaltern', the paper will further explore post-colonial issues of subjectivity and identity-formation.

Rabindranath Tagore is an iconoclastic writer of his time who is famous for his unconventional women characters. Looking into all his genres we will be able to find rebellious women characters who challenge the prevailing social custom which incarcerates the position of women. Binodini (*Chokher Bali*), Bimala (*Ghore-Bhore*), Prakriti (*Chandalika*), etc. are some of Tagore's famous women characters who unconventionally transcended the boundaries in their respective process of the maturation of their selfhood. Although, these women transcend the boundaries for their own gratification but it leaves the food for thought to think about Tagore's emancipator and iconoclastic ideas. For creating these women characters, Tagore was severely criticized by his fellow critics but he left no stone unturned to think and write for the right cause.

One such right cause for Tagore was to speak on behalf of the Dalits. When violence and discrimination were constantly on the rise in India despite the dalits were aware of their being as equal to the other castes, Tagore addresses this problem of 'untouchability' in his much acclaimed dance drama *Chandalika*. Based on a Buddhist ideology, this fable inspired Tagore to protest against the age-old struggle of the marginalized section of Indian society to attain the status of equality. Published as a dance drama in 1938, *Chandalika* was for the first time staged in Calcutta in the same year. This paper is an effort to revisit the religious and social nuances prevalent in the society of ancient India. Prakriti, the female subaltern in the drama stands as a resolute challenge to the inequitable discourse of untouchability. She becomes a spokeswoman of Tagore's ideal of humanitarianism and universalism.

Tagore's two act play *Chandalika* is a story of Prakriti (*Chandalika*), a low caste girl, who for that reason is thoroughly despised by her neighbors so much that even the street hawkers do not sell their goods to her. She broods over her destiny and curses her mother to give her birth in such a low caste house. In the exposition of the play we are made aware of Prakriti's rendezvous with Ananda, blessed with a

form "radiant as with the light of dawn" (148), and her subsequent act of falling in love for his nobility with a view to seeking the gratification of her heart's long slept desires. The play unfurls the daring deeds of a young girl from the lower community whose fatal desires don't hesitate in exercising wrong means to achieve the love of Ananda, a Buddhist Bhikshu who had renounced the worldly wishes and objectives for the attainment of spiritual goals. Tagore projects him in such a way that he invokes our attention throughout the play without his appearance.

One day, in the same mood, she goes to fetch water from a well where she meets Ananda, a monk, disciple of Lord Buddha. Thirsty and exhausted, Ananda begs for drinking water 'Give me water'. (Tagore 148) Prakriti informs him about her low born but Ananda refutes her and says that all human being are equal and no one can categorize water into different castes. After drinking water, Ananda blesses her and departs. This incident changes Prakriti's total outlook and she begins to live for the day when Ananda would appear again. Her love and veneration for Ananda arouses her self-consciousness and self-esteem. The other day Prakriti sees Ananda chanting hymns with other Buddhist monks but fails to notice her. This incident hurts her deeply and she seeks help of her mother's magic to get him back. Initially, mother was reluctant to use magic on such a pure soul but eventually she agrees on the stubborn insistence of her daughter Prakriti. Prakriti's mother successfully drags Ananda in her refuge but the glow on Ananda's face was lost for which Prakriti strove. On seeing this, Prakriti touches his feet and begs for forgiveness and also told her mother to undo the spell which costs the death of the mother. The play ends with Ananda pronouncing blessings on her.

Untouchability was an ancient indisposition in Hindu society, religion, and culture. In Rigvedic times, there were four classes in society — Brahmin (knowledge), Kshatriya (power), Vaishya (money), and Sudra (waste). In a broader context Untouchable may be subsumed in the category of

the fourth class. He/she is considered to be fount from the feet of the Creator and this consideration of religious texts is the source from which this discriminative discourse of Hindu religion outflows. This powerful discourse subsisted in literature and history of that time which determined the fate of these people. These types of writings reinforce the construction of such biased discourse through which the poor section of Indian society is relegated to the metaphoric and geographical compass of untouchability. If we look into the apex source of class division there is no as such precedent of untouchability. It is only with the interpretation of those hymns; the caste system and untouchability took birth. As Paramanshi Jaidev asserts in his book *Dalit in early Buddhism* "It is only in one of the later hymns, the celebrated purushasukta, that a reference has been made to four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the primeval being. The name of those four orders are given there as Brahamana, Rajanya, Vaishya, and Sudra, who are said to have come respectively from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the creator. The particularly limbs associated with these divisions and the order in which they are mentioned probably indicate their status in the society of the time, though no such interpretation is directly given in the hymn."(11)

The discourse of untouchability was constructed and preceded with the time as Paramanshi Jaidev details the Chandaal's miserable constructed status in his book *Dalit in Early Buddhism* "It is said in Apstamb holy writ (2.1.2.8) that it is a sin to see and touch Chandal and in Gautama holy writ (15.24) it is also said that it is an ill omen seeing him throwing the dead body....Meeting with Chandal is denied on his residence or where he is staying, the study of Vedas is not permitted....In Gautama holy writ (14.30) it is stated that if by touch of any Chandal, the body became unchaste, that can be purified by taking bath with the touched clothes. (173) Chandals have no right to live their lives rightfully according to Karma theory. They do good or bad nothing matters; they are supposed to live their lives on the fringes of the society. They are themselves deluded to the false consciousness that they are the lower caste and cannot enjoy the rights equally with the higher castes. According to them their status in the society is predestined and irrevocable. As in the play also Prakriti's mother Maya ascertains to her:

... you were born a slave. It is the writ of Destiny, who can undo it? (152)

In *Chandalika*, Tagore uses an ancient Buddhist legend for his play, but treats it in a highly imaginative way, giving it a modernist interpretation. In Tagore's dance drama, the central protagonist is Prakriti, the untouchable girl, not Lord Buddha or his disciple Ananda as in the original story. Tagore reconstructs and weaves the story around the main protagonist Prakriti, a chandaal girl. His motif behind representing the story must have been bringing a subaltern / Dalit's elevation to an illuminated and spiritually transformed human being from an ideologically despicable, subalternised and marginalised human position. The Buddhist monk, Ananda is the elevator and Prakriti is the elevated one.

Prakriti's meeting with Ananda enlightened her when he asked her for water, Prakriti felt self-elevated and in that self-

elevation Prakriti deconstruct all the discourses of untouchability. She constructs her own identity by contravening the circumscribed and inequitable constraints of her religion, caste-system and society. A sense of emancipation came into her mind and in her devoted and gratified manner Prakriti sings:

Blessed am I, says the flower, who belong to the earth.  
For I serve you, my God, in this my lowly home.  
Make me forget that I am born of dust,  
For my spirit is free from it.  
When you bend your eyes upon me my petals tremble in joy;  
Give me a touch of your feet and make me heavenly,  
For the earth must offer its worship through me.  
(151)

In the above mentioned poetic lines, Tagore tries to say that the Buddhist monk Ananda is the messenger of God who comes up with the message of equality to Prakriti. When Prakriti informed Ananda about her lower caste he responded to her, "As I am a human being, so also are you, and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirst."(148) after this Prakriti flouts the stringent strictures posed by Hindu religion against her expressive self and feels as she took a new birth. Prakriti's mother, Maya, warns her that she belongs to a Chandaal family and she can never procure her illusive pursuits; that she is an untouchable. But it does not cast any depressive effect on Prakriti's mind. She is now tireless to contradict this discourse of untouchability and subalternity.

In this dance play, Tagore also expostulates with the discriminative religious discourse through his radical female character Prakriti. In the play, after Prakriti's meeting with Ananda she nurtures an ambition of exalting herself above the 'dust' of Chandaal reality and does not care for the codes of decorum, religion and culture. She resolutely 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. (155)

On one occasion Prakriti also asserts to her mother:

A religion that insults is a false religion. (154)

Tagore's female protagonist spurns the myth of caste and origin. She asserts her mother that "...self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder." (148) Sutapa Chaudhuri in his article 'Signifying the Self: Intersections of Class, Caste and Gender in Rabindranath Tagore's Dance Drama *Chandalika* (1938)' asserts "In Tagore's hands Prakriti becomes a woman living on fringes of human society – a marginalized figure of Hindu society discriminated against for her social background in a caste-segregated world view. By addressing the theme of untouchability through this dance drama Tagore was making an extremely bold socio-political statement against the discrimination of untouchables that in a way supported Mahatma Gandhi's pro-Harijan campaign in the late 1930s India" (553).

The spell of the primeval earth applied by Prakriti's mother drags Ananda into her vortex of passionate love.

Although her love for Ananda may be the provenance of an earthly desire, but this works as an influential force against the ideological hypocrisies prevalent in those times. She emerges as a feminine resistant to the male ideology-maker. She does not concede defeat in her struggle and eventually succeeds into pulverizing the male power. The 'light and radiance' of the male power vitiates when the female opponent takes up the cudgels to subvert him. Prakriti's mother later affirms that a woman has sufficient power to defeat the male discourse of caste, race and patriarchy. She fosters her daughter's courage to challenge the stringent power structures:

You are a woman; by serving you must worship,  
and by serving you must rule. Women alone can in  
a moment overstep the bounds of caste. (151)

In the Indian context, a holy man asking for water from an untouchable violates a social as well as a religious norm. To receive and to give food or water are sacrilegious for both. The monk's extraordinarily radical request awakens Prakriti's awareness of her own innate Self. Through the universal image of water, Tagore intertwines the ideological revolution reflected in the social, religious, and political scene of his own time. Prakriti's self-assertion imbued in desire is manifested in her love for the young monk. Infused by eros, Prakriti's love ascends to agape through dedication and repentance to liberation. It is through love that Prakriti transcends her socially imposed caste and ultimately signifies herself as a radical human being.

Tagore's aim behind this play must have been to scrutinize the uneven and biased structure of contemporary Indian society, culture, and religion; the four-fold structure of classes in Hinduism. He culls the account of *Chandalika* from Buddhist scriptures and renders it a fictional form to expose the evils of Indian caste-system, untouchability and racism. He presents *Chandalika* as form of 'Shakti' (symbol of power), who fights the rigorous social and religious system. Although, representation of subaltern studies was little-known in Tagore's time, but it is Tagore's highly humanitarian and universal thinking that without knowing any of the constructed theories he dealt with all the modern issues in his works. The only thing Tagore knew is what is humane and what is not.

Tagore's ideology of feminist perspective can be seen in his Prakriti's portrayal and can be very well related to Elaine Showalter's views in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" where she suggests, "The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetic; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research" (Showalter 147).

Thus, it can be said that *Chandalika* revolves around the most noteworthy issues of the time--untouchability. According to Indra Nath Choudhuri, "Tagore's central idea was "...to free the present- the now, and make it part of the eternal time; and in his dance dramas this is fully realized. Tagore's increasing interest in dance in the last phase of his life reflects his deepening sensitivity to the ecstatic, spiritual aspect of dance, exemplified by the transcendent rhythm of dance which constitutes the flux and the timeless, eternal order of the universe (IndraNathChoudhuri 130).

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