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MARGINALITY VS SPIRITUALITY IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S CHANDALIKA

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ABSTRACT

Chandalika has a special place as it foregrounds the theme of female desire in an untouchable girl, a tabooed subject in his times, indeed even now in Bengali writings. This paper tries to show the intersections of caste, class and gender as well as the evolution of selfhood in Prakriti, the Chandal girl. Rabindranath Tagore realized that Indian society was "permeated by religion and living myth, endowed with a psychic landscape having its own concept of time and space". He tried to portray this unique reality through modes and methods indigenous to Indian culture. According to the story Ananda, the famous disciple of the Buddha, approaches towards a well to ask for water from a *Chandalini*, a young untouchable girl. Prakriti, the Chandalini, serves him water from her pitcher and falls in love with him at the first sight. Her passion to possess Ananda compels her mother to cast a magic spell on Ananda and to drag him to her house. The spell proves stronger and Ananda is dragged to the couch spread for him by the *Chandalini*. Ananda prays to the Buddha to save himself from this shame and remorse. Consequently, Buddha breaks the magic spell and frees Ananda, who walks away from the *Chandalini*, as pure as he came.

KEYWORDS:

Caste, Class, Magic, Indian Culture.

INTRODUCTION

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. *Chandalika*, Tagore uses an ancient Buddhist legend for his play, but treats it in a highly imaginative way,

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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. In Tagore's hands Prakriti becomes a woman living on the fringes of human society, a marginalized figure of Hindu society discriminated against for her social background in a caste-segregated world view. In Tagore's *Chandalika*, Prakriti becomes obsessed with Ananda as he is the first and only person outside her caste who treats her as a human being of equal standing instead of shunning her as an untouchable. For Prakriti, Ananda embodies liberation, a person who has shown her a way out of the stultifying darkness of self-negation, who has created a revolution in the way she perceives the world and the way the world perceives her. 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.

Chandalika, the dialectics of Prakriti's selfhood and desire gets problematized by the intersection of class and caste with gender. This adds not only to the complexities of her selfhood but also problematizes the attainment of that selfhood through the expression of her desire for Ananda. For Prakriti, the socio-culturally imposed selfhood is that of an untouchable, an outcaste; her desire would only be ratified if it is expressed within her caste and class. To desire for the companionship, indeed, the love of a monk is like reaching for the stars for the untouchable girl. It is a taboo no one should dare to cross. Rejected by others for her caste, her untouchable status, Prakriti at first learns to negate her societal self-identity; but nevertheless she questions the efficacy and fairness of her social standing and silently rages against the Almighty for this injustice. She remains a victim to her socio-culturally determined selfhood as she internalizes the social stigma attached to her caste and class. Yet her questionings show her inner consciousness of herself as a human and thus foreground her agency and power that remains as a latent force inside herself till Ananda awakens this slumbering, latent selfhood and ignites her passion for him.

"I may truly call it my new birth! He came to give me the honor of quenching Man's thirst". "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"

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 neglected *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. Prakriti's mother has magical powers and hopes to be acknowledged for her power. When water dries up and people are dying of thirst, the king orders her to find water, but when she finds water, they are not allowed to use the same water. Prakriti calls her mother's magic useless as it does not redeem them of the suffering and humiliation. But when Prakriti is smitten by a Buddhist monk "Ananda" who treats her like a normal human being, she compels her mother to use her spell. However she realizes her folly and requests her mother to take back the spell at the cost of her mother's life.

"You are unclean; beware of tainting the outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your own place, narrow as it is. To stray anywhere beyond its limits is to".

While Prakriti believes in her new birth, her mother however is ironical of such a possibility. Tagore's dramatic excellence is best witnessed in this problematisation of 'emancipation from caste' by

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infusing belief and disbelief, even adding irony and suspense to the possibility of such freedom and liberation from untouchability. It is not the 'new birth' from caste alone that Tagore is contextualizing in Prakriti here. In fact, this 'new birth' of her can be viewed as a new birth of sexuality for Prakriti as she is young and beautiful.

Chandalika, thus, looks like, apparently, a chronicle of the Buddha's disciple and his divinity. 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. 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*. The protagonist of *Chandalika*, Prakriti, the Chandal girl, in the end of her tragic experience, realizes 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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