

Marginality in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika*

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Rabindranath Tagore, as we all know, is one of the greatest Indo-English dramatists in English literature. And drama for him, as perhaps with a firm structure, is not just an exercise in drama, but a path and means of exploration into the various ideas and symbols of life. It means that a symbol is developed when an image gets concreted. Hence, his imagery has been created in an oblique fashion in his dramas. To him, a play needs a plot even as a house needs a firm structure. A play has also a plot, characters, dialogues and sentiments analysing the content of man's personality. He has spoken about the material world, the world of memory and the universal self in his dramas. In this way, the birth of his drama takes place in the unified state of these three worlds. Thus the time and space-bound world of incidents is the basis of the drama. When it is translated into theoretic subject matter, it transports us into a level of spiritual consciousness. He has also composed poems, novels and stories in English. His *Gitanjali* offers songs in which we get his meditation on the relationship between God and human beings. His other works include *The Crescent Moon*, *The Gardener*, *Chitra*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *The Post Office*, *Hungry Stones*, *Gora*, *Broken Ties*, *Sanyasi*, *The King and the Queen*, *Sacrifice*, *Natir Puja*, *Chandalika*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *Karan and Kunti*, *the Fugitive and Other Poems* and *Lover's Gift*. In explaining the distinctiveness of human personality, he has pointed out distinction between man and other animal in his works. He has regard for the Buddha. The Buddhist principle of man's social equality may allure to his concept of 'divinity in man'. In this regard, his *Chandalika* has a dramatic expression of his ideology.

Tagore's *Chandalika* deals with Prakriti, a young girl of the 'untouchable' caste named Chandalika. She is the central, the most dominant character of the play. In the beginning part of the play, Chandalika gets up early in the morning and tries to tend to her chores. When she hears the call of the flower sellers in the market she goes in search of them. When she reaches near them the high caste women ask the flower sellers not to sell her as she was an untouchable. In this situation, she shuns and feels fury and rages at the injustice of society. She becomes depressed but her mother, Maya scolds her urging her to tend her daily work. What she is not able to get in her real life, she tries to create it by

the power of imagination. Therefore, the play is a visual presentation of the age-old struggle of the marginalised section of Indian society and the status of equality. She also relates a Buddhist legend associated with Ananda, a disciple of the Buddha. Thus the play has only two parts and three characters – Prakriti (Chandalika), Maya and Ananda.

Chandalika is a short drama in which Prakriti and Maya represent the marginalised world. They have to face a conflict with the spiritual world of Ananda. It is also a criticism which depicts casteism. Maya has to find her daughter's listlessness, difficult to understand. After that Chandalika reveals her frustration to her mother, asking why she had ever born an untouchable blaming god. When Ananda comes and asks Chandalika for some water to quench his thirst she refers to give water to her low chandale caste and orthodox sense. She thinks that a holy monk's asking for water from an untouchable is completely unheard these days. Having observed her surprise Ananda rejects her explanation and says that all human beings are equal in the eyes of god. He suggests her to judge herself by her own standards rather than artificial and unjust society. His revolutionary words deeply affect her heart and she serves him water from the well. She thinks that Ananda is real and she begins to dance in ecstasy. In this way, the legendary Buddhist monk opens the blind mind of Chandalika with a divine preaching of equality. Thus Chandalika presents herself as a symbol of revolt against the age-old malady of the Indian society.

The dramatist states that Ananda's teaching brings a sea change in the attitude of Prakriti. She awakens to a new life – a life where humanism is rendered and she is no chandal but a human being. She argues with her mother:

Plenty of slaves are born with royal
blood, but I am no slave; plenty of
chandals are born of Brahmin
families, but I am not a chandal...

(Tagore 152)

Prakriti has emotions of love and desire for Ananda. Ananda has become her world and reason for living. She tries to revolt against the age-old shackles of the marginality of Indian society. Hence, Beena Agarwal observes :

Caste is a man-made institution confined to transitory ends. It can neither strengthen nor spoil the dignity of marriage. (Agarwal 87)

Thus in the development of his plot, Tagore creates a romantic atmosphere during certain important sequences. Like the capture of Ananda, Prakriti's conflict increases between her passion and duty. Also, there is the minor theme of the girl's urge for freedom as well as her consequent anticipation of a deliverer. As regards, every Buddhist monk is bound by the divine vow of the celibacy and strict morality. Prakriti oversteps morality and ethical boundaries. This affects her spiritual tragedy. Kriplani calls it a 'tragedy of self-consciousness over-reaching its limit'. (145) She loses her fear for the social and the religious codes of conduct and she 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)

As already shown in the analysis of the plot, Tagore definitely scores over Prakriti in characterization. Though Ananda does not display his weakness in *Chandalika*, more than anything else, Prakriti is not a puppet in the hand of Ananda.

The second part of *Chandalika* is set in the conflict of Prakriti. She has the emotions of love and desires for Ananda. She requests her mother to use her supernatural powers to bring Ananda back to her. After seeing the desperate plight of her daughter, Maya relents and Ananda is brought to her by evil forces. But Ananda immerses in his inner spiritual self and moves on chanting the hymns of Buddha. He returns sick and begs for some water. Having seen him Chandalika is struck with horror at what she has done. In her tears, she tells that she is not worthy enough to give him water. After hearing her speech Ananda blesses her and says that her tear of repentance has washed away her mistakes and has lifted her veil of ignorance. She has become enlightened, and has broken the circle of illusion. In this way she follows the path of selflessness which is road to 'nirvana' and Ananda accepts her as her disciple. At this stage, the audience can re-experience a degree of suspense and anxiety created by Ananda. Here the dramatist does not forget to highlight the sermons of the Buddha.

It seems that Prakriti is horrified at the change of Ananda. Heavenly glow of Ananda has been vanished by Maya's spell. In the end her mother too, begging forgiveness dies before Ananda. Here Tagore has represented his psychological revolt against the age-old caste suppression. However, the dramatist reveals tragic situation of Chandalika. As S. R. Sharma has written:

Against the abomination of untouchability he, of course wrote his moving play *Chandalika*. Since that abomination continues with us in fact assuming formidable proportion not so infrequently, the play requires the new relevance. (Sharma 92)

Lastly the play reveals the Hindu concept of caste - distinction and the social disorder of India. As in his other plays, Tagore resorts to the Elizabethan model in *Chandalika* also. Hence Indra Nath Choudhuri has remarked:

In *Chandalika* almost in the same process the sinful means used to achieve a noble end are discarded. With the help of a mantra learnt from her mother Chandalika wanted to win over Ananda. On another level this story reveals the reality of India of that time which deeply disturbed Tagore as well as Mahatma Gandhi. On a yet different level, through this reality of the submerged class has entered the openness of the serene natural life of India... (Choudhuri 134)

To conclude Tagore maintains marginality and divinity in *Chandalika*, though there is not much suspense in the love sequences of Prakriti with Ananda. However, Tagore's introduction of the psychological revolt, against the age-old caste suppression suppresses its limit in the drama and results in tragedy. To the dramatist the Hindu concept of caste distinction based on one's birth is inhuman. It is essential to wipe it and establish equality everywhere. This is the call of the modern era. Outcastes are exploited in various spheres – social, physical, financial, moral as

well as psychological. They are crushed and cramped again and again by the Hindu religion. This is a social unrest. Anyway, out of the social order, some moral restraints should be practised by all human beings. In the end, *Chandalika* tries to correct her mistake of overhauling human ethics. Like Ananda, Tagore has resorted to the practice of an Indian world in which the felicity of expression is visible. Thus, his image may be seen in Prakriti's character. Here the dramatist has grappled with the images of man and woman on the social scene, the complexities of emotions centring round human verities of love, companionship, and problems relating to his own art.

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