

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD IN THE PLAY CHANDALIKA

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Abstract

In Rabindranath Tagore's play Chandalika the girl Prakriti, daughter of a black magician and Prakriti's mother Maya reflect strong womanhood because both are portrayed strong throughout the play. Tagore through the characters of Prakriti and Maya represents the voice of the silenced and marginalized in history and also describes the journey of these female characters from total ignorance to full knowledge. This paper is a humble attempt to analyze the play Chandalika from the angle of 'womanhood.'

Keywords : Womanhood, Untouchable, Spells, Marginalized, Awakening, Impulse, Determination

"Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural or in need of defence."¹

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the greatest writers in modern Indian literature wrote primarily in Bengali, but had a mastery of English also. He was a great poet and a great man, and he has left behind him a great institution the Vishvabharti at Shantiniketan. Tagore stands as unique figure in the history of Indian theatre. He was a talented actor, producer and composer and had an inborn feeling for the stage. Tagore discovered the vitality and freshness of the folk theatre and taught his contemporaries simplicity of form and depth of theme. Involved in the classics of Hindu dramaturgy and alive to the European technique of production and indigenous folk forms, he evolved the dramatic form which influenced the Bengali theatre. His dramas are quite suitable for open air than for closed theatre. "His search for the infinite in the finite, of the limitless in the limited, of the cosmic energy in a speck of dust continued throughout his work and he led his characters down the path of love to the final comprehension of the infinite."² A vast body of writings of Tagore has great abundance, variety and quality which mark Tagore as an immensely gifted writer. Some of his other important plays are Sacrifice, Malini, The King of the Dark Chamber and The Post office etc. Tagore, the celebrated author of Gitanjali was awarded Noble Prize for literature in 1913. But Tagore's comment on it was: "Henceforth I shall have no peace."³ Tagore wanted to give a new tone to Bengali stage because he was a gifted actor himself. "Tagore could start the play, strike the opening chords, name the characters, — memory and imagination would do the rest."⁴ Ortega Y. Gasset explains Tagore's success "Rabindranath is not in need of anything historical and sumptuary, particular to his time or his land. With a little of sun with sky and clouds, with mountain and thirst with storms and river banks, with door and the frame of window from which to look out, and above all, with a loving fervor for God, he produces his songs. This lyric poetry thus consists of universal things which are and have been everywhere and transforms it into a bird eager to sing from every branch."⁵

The Short dance drama Chandalika discussed in the present paper was written in the year 1933 and translated into English in 1938. In this play Prakriti, daughter of black magician Chandal and an 'untouchable' girl falls in love with a Buddhist monk, Ananda in a chance meeting near a well. Once in a hot noon Ananda feels very thirsty and asks Prakriti for some water. The girl was astonished at his request and hesitated to give him water to drink because she belonged to low caste. Ananda's words 'give me water' has a magic effect on the cramped spirit of the low caste girl. His compassionate understanding kindles self-respect of Prakriti. She comes to taste a new sense of freedom and dignity — "a new life." The foolish girl Prakriti is infatuated with the man who brought her release from low caste and self re-approach by asking some water. In order to have Ananda, she forces her mother to use spells on Ananda to ensure his return and complete her victory. The spells work but her victory becomes her biggest defeat. Ananda is dragged down with irresistible force but his tormented face and furious storm strike terror in Prakriti's heart. She finally relents and implores her mother to undo the spell. "But Prakriti's love is a devouring fever of desire, and she persuades her mother to work the primordial earth spell on Ananda so that he may return and quench the raging fever."⁶

In the present paper the concept of womanhood is discussed through two female characters one protagonist of the play Prakriti and second Prakriti's mother Maya. In this play, the girl Chandalika an untouchable and the daughter of black magician 'Chandal' emerge as a voice of the silenced and marginalized in history. She appears as a rebel who questions societal norms that relegated her to an existence of lesser being, an untouchable. One

of the defining moments in the play is when Ananda, the monk and disciple of lord Buddha pleads “ Give me water”⁷ and Prakriti resists by voicing her powerlessness to quench the monk’s thirst. This is the moment of awakening for the daughter of Chandal when the monk tells her she is not impure but the child of the same almighty like others. All this suddenly elevate Prakriti to a moment of recognition while she has internalized herself as a victim of societal stigma and negated her selfhood. Recounting this incident to her mother, she says “No this is a tale of my new birth.” (p. 77) Prakriti says to her mother:

“I was washing that calf at the well – the one whose mother died. Then a Buddhist monk came and stood before me, in his yellow robes, and said ‘Give me water.’ My heart leaped with wonder. I started up trembling and bowed before his feet, without touching them. His form was radiant as with the light of dawn. I said, I am a Chandalini and the well-water is unclean.’ He said, ‘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.’ For the first time in my life I heard such words, for the first time I poured water into his cupped-hands-the hands of a man the very dust of whose feet I would never have dared to touch.” (p.76)

In the play, Prakriti realizes her true identity as a human being sent on earth like all other human beings after a brief exoneration of Bhikshu, Ananda. After feeling herself as a human being like others, Prakriti believes wrongly that she also has the right to fall in love with the Buddhist monk. She says to her mother:

“Was there no other water, Mother, in all Sravasti city? Why did he come to this well of all wells? I may truly call it my new birth! He came to give me the honour of quenching man’s thirst. That was the mighty act of merit which he sought. Nowhere else could he have found the water which could fulfill his holy vow— no, not in any sacred stream.” (p.76-77)

But when Prakriti is not able to achieve her love with Ananda, she compels her mother to use her magic powers to drag Ananda at her door. Initially Prakriti feels very happy when the magic starts working. But later on when she sees the face of Ananda in the magic mirror, she feels very disappointed with the predicament on Bhikshu’s face:

“... the light was gone only torment, unfathomable torment, was in his face.” (p. 85)

Prakriti also says:

“Fie upon it, how I am shamed! Again and again his eyes grew red, as though he were about to curse. Again and again he trampled down the glowing fires of anger, and at last his anger turned upon himself, quivering like a spear, and pierced his own breast.” (p. 86)

When she sees Ananda standing in front of her in almost a mutilated state she repents and surrenders in shame. In a battle of magical chants and spiritual powers, Prakriti comes to a conclusion that love can never be forced or possessed.

She always carries with her, the socio-culturally imposed selfhood of untouchable and an outcaste. The task to get the love of Ananda seems to be difficult task. Getting rejected by others for her caste, her untouchable status, Prakriti at first learns to negate her societal self-identity and she pursues a silent path of rage against the almighty for his injustice. It is through the Buddhist monk Ananda that Prakriti first learns to observe herself as a human being. By giving water to Ananda, it seems that the ‘untouchable’ girl has quenched her own thirst for self-respect. It is in the eyes of Ananda that Prakriti sees herself as an equal to all the other human beings. She now gains an understanding of the selfhood, an awareness of her identity as a woman and an acknowledgement of the self worth. It is with her desire as a female she develops the courage a daring even to bring Ananda back to her at any cost by any means:

“I feel 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! Bring him here, you must! I speak so boldly, of such great matter- isn’t that in itself a wonder? Who worked the wonder but he? Shall there not be further wonders? Shall he not come to my side and sit with me on the corner of my cloth?”(p. 80)

One of the most important aspects of Prakriti is her fixed determination to go any lengths in order to fulfill her desires. As self-assured mature woman, she is also conscious of her selfhood and female desires. She also takes full responsibility of her own deeds. Prakriti as her name suggests ‘nature’ shows that through the entire play her journey is a spiritual journey through desire to discover her own self and her spiritual strength. Prakriti sings:

“Blessed am I, says the flower, who belongs to the earth, for I serve you, my God, in this my lovely 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.” (p. 78)

Prakriti’s mother, a devoted mother and the greatest sufferer in the play also helps her to maintain the selfhood as a strongwoman. She tells her daughter Prakriti that only a woman can overstep the bounds of the caste in a moment. She says that a woman worships by serving. She rules men and the world by serving she can even win the heart of a man by her womanhood:

“You are a woman; by serving you must worship, and by serving you must rule. Woman alone can in a moment overstep the bounds of caste; when once curtains of destiny are drawn aside, they all stand revealed in their queenliness.” (p.78)

After continuous insistence of Prakriti to use magic power, the mother starts chanting her magic spell. During this process, twice or thrice she feels so exhausted by her chanting of magic spells, but she continues with her magic spell:

“Child, I can do no more; the spell is weakening, I am failing in body and soul.” (p. 87)

She further says to Prakriti:

“Now, Prakriti take your mirror and look. See, a dark shadow has fallen over the altar. My heart is bursting and I can do no more. Look into the mirror – how long will it be now.” (p.88)

As a woman she sticks on her determination to drag Ananda at the door. Towards the end of the play Prakriti herself admits after the arrival of Ananda:

“O lord, you have come to give me deliverance, therefore have you known this torment. Forgive me, forgive me. Let your feet spurn afar the endless reproach of my birth. I have dragged you down to earth, how else could you raise me to your heaven? O pure one, the dust has soiled your feet, but they have not soiled in vain. The veil of my illusion shall fall upon them, and wipe away the dust. Victory, victory to thee, O Lord!” (p. 89)

Even the mother at the end also asks for forgiveness:

“Victory to thee, O Lord. My sin and my life lie together at thy feet, and my days end here, in the heaven of thy forgiveness.” (p. 89)

In the play Tagore describes the journey of his female characters from total ignorance to full knowledge because when Prakriti realizes her identity she becomes strong willed. Both Prakriti and her mother are fully determined throughout the play to go any lengths in order to fulfill their desires. Prakriti realizes her actual place and position in family and society after meeting Ananda. It is her affirmation of will that she is ready to bear the risk of her mother's life who, dies during the magic spell. Both women fulfill their inner quest of untouchable and marginalized in the play by acquiring self realization and self assertion.

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