



Interpreting feminine consciousness in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika*

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore is a well known Indian English writer of Renaissance age. He is the well Known philosopher founder of 'Shantiniketan', a great poet, novelist, journalist, musician, mystic and playwright. Talking about women he views his women in his writing. Many of his dramas are dance dramas, among which *Chandalika* has a special place.

The present study mainly focuses the image of women in Rabindranath Tagore *Chandalika*. The play is based on the theme of female desire of love and sacrifice of life of a female for daughter's love. Tagore's 1936 essay *Nari* (woman) urged women to step out of the precinct of their home to pursue an education and cultivate their intellect stressing the importance of their autonomous self development. Tagore used feminism in his various writings, example mother's love. 'Mother' is the great creation of God. The same theme he has shown in *Chandalika*. There is only one male character in *Chandalika*, having a less important role compared to female characters. He has given more importance to female characters.

Keywords: renaissance, feminism, autonomous

Introduction

Theatre is living art form and therefore, changes continuously. The origin and development of theatre in India may be broadly divided into three phases. The first is marked by the high-quality Sanskrit dramatic literature imaginative staging styles as well as a profound theatrical reflection as in Bharata's *Natyashastra*. The second phase begins after the decline of the classical Sanskrit theatre and the emergence in all the regional languages of India varied forms of popular but innovative theatre marked by the transformation of the classical theatre in the changed socio-political conditions. The third phase consists in the encounter of Indian theatre with West in the nineteenth century, causing the growth of a new kind of theatre in urban centres, weakening links with tradition and intensifying the urban-rural divide.

The Indian English Drama began in the 18th century when British Empire came and strengthened its political power in India. It is started with the publication of Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* in 1813. It is a social play in which the author tries to present the conflict between the East and the West. The real development of Indian English Drama is started with the publication of Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization* in 1871. He also translated *Ratnavali* (1859) and *Sermista* (1859) into English, originally written in Bangla. Indian English Drama exhibited its maturity and genius after a long period in the twentieth century. Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory till the fifteenth century but thereafter Indian drama activity almost came to an end due to certain invasion on India. When Britishers came in India, the crippled Indian drama regained its strength. In 1920, a new drama in almost all the Indian languages came to the fore, it was a drama largely influenced by prevailing movements like Marxism, Psychoanalysis, symliolism, and surrealism for certain reasons and difficulties the growth of Indian English drama has not been able to keep pace with that of poetry and fiction.

Indian drama got a new footing when Kendriya Natak Sangeet Akadmi was started in January 1953, National school of drama set up Sangeet Natak Akadmi in 1959, was another development. In the 1960s by suitable mixing of various styles and techniques from Sanskrit western theatre, the modern Indian theatre was given a new, versatile, and broader approach at every level of creativity; the year 1972, was a landmark year for Indian theatre. Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have contributed to the modernization of the face of the Indian theatre, these play wrights have made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuositities. They used legends, folklores, myths, history with splendid results. They broke the barrier of regional works at national level languages and produced many good works at national level. They do, however, represent Indian drama at national level for they dramatized universal aspects of human life in India.

Contemporary Indian English drama presents the issues related to the urban middle class, English speaking society which is now undergoing a noticeable cultural change. Issues like homosexuality licentiousness, marital infidelity are common subjects of plays. For example: Do the Needful, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, The Harvest etc. Socio-cultural scenario of India was totally affected to a great extent by the colonial rules. Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) is perhaps the most prolific of the living Indian English playwright. Produced Dumb Dancer and OM in 1961 Thorns on a Convas in 1962 and Captives in 1963. Then he produced An experiment with truth in 1969, Inquilab in 1970, Darjeeling Tea in 1971 and The Refugee in 1979. Sonar Bangla and OM Mane Padme Hum in 1972 and so on. Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) wrote his first play Ashadh ka ek din in 1958 which is now translated into English. In his life time Rakesh published three full length plays, Ashadh ka ek din (1958), Lehron ke rajhans (1963) and Aadhe-adhure (1969) which are translated into English. Girish Karnad, one of the creative geniuses of the modern

age. His historical play *Tughlaq* is a great classic in Indian dramatic literature. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), based on the dreams of a great warrior. *Odakalu Bimba (A Heap of Broken Images)* appeared in 2005, is based neither on mythology nor history. Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), a leading playwright, is fundamentally a social commentator. Tendulkar's *Kamala* (1981), a play in two acts, projects the deplorable state of women who are treated as mere objects to be bartered, bought and sold. Badal Sircar a great Bengali playwright is among the three great contemporary writers Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh. Badal Sircar delves deep into the problems of middle-class society. His later plays, *Procession* (1972), *Bhoma* (1974) and *State News* (1979) are based on the concept of the Third Theatre.

The world knows Rabindranath Tagore as a poet, philosopher, thinker, painter, musician, and social activist, but few know the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore as a feminist, with gender issues forming the underlying theme in many of his works. From *Chitrangada* to *Choker Bali*, he was scornful in his comments against gender suppression. He has wonderfully celebrated womanhood in many of his works and his works are relevant today. Tagore's works - stories, novels, poetry and drama - all have women characters in the kernel. As the plot thickens, the women characters emerge alive and the author's social perception is discovered. He does not cut any reformist image for himself; he is concerned with the umpteen ills that plague our society. He draws attention to the problems and then leaves the reader to comprehend.

Tagore was naturally sensitized over the predicament of women in Indian society; he wanted to establish the individuality of women because individuality ensures dignity, self respect and sexual-independence of women. From the very beginning of the 20th century Tagore conceptualized the newer complexities, various ideas and current thoughts of social life of Bengal. There were already signs of break-up of large Bengali joint families and community life. Sense of individual identity became firmer, there developed a need for determining the individual's relation with society.

Tagore advanced the women's cause by showing rebellion by his heroines. Individualism is the marker of his female characters. They are crusader of individual freedom. He campaigned for women's individuality ever since he wrote *Choker Bali* (The Eyesore). He was oscillates between traditionalism and bold unconventionally on the gender question in his works. Tagore's heroines are not extravagantly traditional. They are the 'new woman'. They undergo emotional crisis. They want love, affection, self expression and freedom of thought. Tagore's progressivist thinking was vehemently protested in his age - but what the great seer could feel and write more than one and half century before what had to come true in modern times. The modern women are not only a feminists but are a kind of revolt against social conventions. Feminism is not only consciousness of female for equality with males but Tagore seems to be asking new questions of old text.

Chandalika is an untouchable girl (name Prakriti) and the daughter of a magician. This society is called as 'Chandal' in that age, and emerges as a voice of the silenced and marginalized in history. She is a rebel who questions societal norms that relegated her to an existence of a lesser being, an untouchable. She once meets Ananda, the Buddhist monk, who demands her to draw water from the

well, and she rejects it due to untouchability. He opens her eyes and conveys to her that there is no cast difference and humans are equal one. This realization of Prakriti's selfhood is intermingled with the conscious negation of a socially imposed caste and class as well as acknowledgement of herself as a woman proud of her self worth. After the realization of the self, she meets Ananda many times and falls in love with him becomes possessive of him and ask her mother refused to do it, as he was a Buddhist monk and it is wrong to one use magic. She warned her that when she stops her magic, she would die. This shows her possessiveness for Ananda, her love.

The mother's blind love motivates, her to use the magic power for Prakriti's love, Ananda. As the magic starts, Ananda starts to come back from his spiritual journey. The magic powers of Maya contest with Ananda's spiritual power until he is forced against his will to come back to Prakriti. Now he looks Paler and weaker. Prakriti is observing all these changes in Ananda and he is near her door, she asks her mother to stop the magic. For this is the moment when she realizes her mistake and wants Ananda to go back on his spiritual journey. Mother stops the magic and dies immediately. Ananda goes on his journey and Prakriti remains alone.

Thus, Rabindranath Tagore has shown the sacrifice and greatness of females in his drama entitled *Chandalika*. The era in which he conceived *Chandalika* in the form of a dance drama was also an age in which untouchability and narrow-mindedness prevailed in the society. Tagore's women characters are superior to other ordinary women in society. They are role model for women. Suffering women can improve their circumstances by imitating the women characters of Rabindranath Tagore. Through her dance movements, Chandalika (Prakriti) articulates her anger and love-anger, against a social status imposed upon her to whom she found herself bound for life, and the love for a monk who respected and acknowledged her as a human being.

One of the moments defining helplessness by Prakriti in the play is when Ananda, the monk and disciple of Lord Buddha pleads, "Give me some water", and she resists by voicing her powerlessness to quench his thirst. This is the moment of awakening for Chandalika. The monk tells her that she was not impure but a child of the same Almighty like others. She is the first human being and a child of God. Now there realization dawns upon Prakriti that all this time she has been a victim of society and its social stigma. Recounting this incident to her mother, she says "This is my new birth. In satisfying his thirst, I feel baptized. I am aware of my 'self' now mother. I now know what freedom tastes like".

It is true that the monk appears as a symbol of freedom to Prakriti but he is not the protagonist of the play, Unlike the Buddhist Legend describing Ananda's journey that the Tagore modeled his play on. For Tagore, Prakriti's journey occupies centre-stage. Tagore, through his drama, has signified that the society's issue and their superstitions never blind humanity. It is, indeed, ironic to see how a girl named "Prakriti" meaning 'Nature' can be enmeshed in a web of class, caste and gender distinctions. Nature is meant to take in everything and is never victimized by the society, unlike 'Prakriti'.

Prakriti commits the mistake of keeping her mother's life at stake when her love for Ananda crosses all boundaries. Her

blind love for Ananda makes her to plead to her mother, Maya, to bring him to her by chanting the fiercest magic spell of 'Nagpash Mantra'. Only in the penultimate scene does she realize her guilt of making a person suffer against his wishes. When she sees him standing in front of her in almost a mutilated state, she repents and the surrender in shame. She now realizes that Ananda has lost all his charm when she has forcefully tried to mean him away from the aura of his thoughts and positivity that he had to go through the journey of being a saint, a monk spreading humanity. In a battle of magical chants and spiritual power, she concludes that love can never be forced or possessed.

Maya has been shown here as a magician, though she does not believe in black magic. She performs magic for good. She is selfless and appears in the story as a pure, motherly soul by helping her child to get her love, Ananda. Even after her warning to Prakriti about her imminent death with the halt of Magic in the process, without caring for herself, she risks her own life to brighten the life of her child. She is aware that the monk has his charm and positive aura due to his own sacrifice that he has made for the society. This shows nothing but the awareness of worldly things as a mother.

Tagore had written this drama in the era where a male-dominated society prevailed. However, this drama had female characters as the prominent ones. Tagore has projected a female to possess a sacrificing nature, as the magician Chandel did sacrifice her life for procuring the love for her daughter. A female as projected by Tagore is also shown as a person with infinite dedication and possessiveness for her love, be it the one - sided love of Prakriti for Anand or be it the motherly love of Chandal for her daughter.

Men, considering women to be weak and subtle, overshadowed them in that era; in fact, Tagore has unmasked true women of the society, who fights for her love. A woman is that element in the society who will never endorses her gains at the stake of losing the real identity of a lover. This moment is signified in the story when Prakriti stops her mother during the magic of getting her love, Ananda, to fall for her. Prakriti realizes that Ananda has lost all the charm and beauty in this process. He has his positive aura as a monk who does not believe in falling in love with a person but only with God. Prakriti loves Ananda because he is the one who unleashes the real identity of being a human first and not an untouchable. She is moved by this act of the monk and falls in love with him without realizing that making people realize their true inner self is the duty of a monk, which he has performed. "Prakriti shows her strength by making Ananda to come to her doorstep begging for love". Poetic speeches, mellifluous songs and artistic dance postures coupled with the fragrance of incense sticks placed at occasional junctures create an atmosphere that has the audience completely mesmerized.

Conclusion

Chandalika has been performed and staged in many languages with multiple interpretations across the country, providing only one thing- 'Tagore has never die'. He continues to live in his literary works and music that will never cease to have relevance across decades. The ongoing cultural festival will stage some of Tagore's most popular plays that one can't afford to miss. Thus, Rabindranath Tagore's women characters in *Chandalika* are superior with

more strength and self realization, and with a conscious mind. A mother sacrifices for her daughter, and Prakriti sacrifice for Ananda's love show the greatness of females in this drama.

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