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FROM CHANDALIKA TO PRAKRITI: EMANCIPATION AND LIBERATION OF A DALIT WOMAN

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Abstract:

For ages dalits have been victims of violence and oppression. Conditions of dalit women who are doubly marginalized are further worse. Caste based hierarchy still exists in India. The present paper analyses Tagore's dance drama Chandalika to trace Prakriti's journey from a Chandal girl to a woman aware of her worth and identity. At the end of the dance drama she no longer remains a Chandalika but arises above the confines of class, caste to arrive at a true understanding of her-self and the world. To map this personal odyssey the play may be subtitled "From Chandalika to Prakriti".

KEY WORDS:

Caste, Identity, oppression, dalit.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature (which internationally comes under the category of Subaltern Studies) emerged into prominence in India after 1960. Dalits were considered 'avarnas' and 'achhut'. Entry into any of the accepted classes of Hindu society-Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra was denied to them. According to Hindu mythology the four varnas came from different parts of Lord Brahma's body. Shudra came from Brahma's legs and accordingly was given the lowest status among the four varnas. Dalits were 'Atishudras' or 'Namashudras'-they did not have any social status. Society never regarded them as human beings although they performed very useful social functions. They worked as scavengers or carriers of the dead. They lead a peripheral existence. In the early twentieth century the two stalwarts of the Dalit movement-Jotirao Phule and Dr Ambedkar used the term dalit to describe the socio-economic-political-religious condition of the dalits. The root Sanskrit word "dal" means to crush or grind food grains. Dalits who were oppressed sections of Hindu society accepted and adopted this term as it truly reflected their position, status, history and identity thereby rejecting Mahatma Gandhi's nomenclature- "Harijan" or children of god.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, modern age hero of the dalits and one of the architects of the Indian constitution was aware of the menace of untouchability. The constitution of India guarantees freedom from untouchability. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes the practice of untouchability. Practice of untouchability is an offense and anyone doing so is punishable by law. Legislation is not enough to uproot evils of untouchability as it is deeply ingrained into the fabric of society. Six decades have passed since India achieved decolonization and entered into a Post-Colonial phase but our minds are still colonized by traditional, unprogressive thoughts. One glimpse at the matrimonial columns of newspapers is enough to reveal that caste based hierarchy still exists in modern India.

Dalit women are doubly marginalized. For ages they have been victims of violence and oppression-social, economic, religious, sexual and psychological. Issues of marginalization of women,

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their lack of agency, of voice and their subjectivity have been reflected in Dalit literature in texts such as Bama's "Sangati"(2001) , Baby Kamle's "Jina Amucha"(2008). Caste, class, gender are parameters which problematise the position of dalit women as all these three factors are equally relevant in their lives.

Rabindranath Tagore, from his study of the Upanisheds and the basic tenets of Buddhism believed in the presence of Divinity within human beings. One of the exponents of Indian mysticism, Rabindranath Tagore, believed that human life is "at once a perfect entity by itself and also a part of the whole process of the Universe" (Sathiraju,K. "The Cosmic Relevance of Tagore's Symbolic Plays"). Hence, he denounced discrimination between man and man on the basis of their birth. In Kaler Jatra the Rath symbolizing the chariot of time can only be moved forward by the low caste labourers. In the early 1930's he targeted "abnormal caste consciousness" and untouchability in texts like Pratham Puja (1932), Suchi(1932) , Rather Roshi. He lectured against untouchability in Bharatborsho, campaigned successfully to open Guruvayoor temple to dalits. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Tagore's dance-drama Chandalika (1938) to reveal emancipation and liberation of a dalit woman.

We know that great minds think alike. Knowledge of Vedantic philosophy, teachings of Thakur Sri Ramkrishna transformed the inner consciousness of Swami Vivekananda. He became a sannyasin and denounced caste based discriminations. In An Appeal to his Countrymen Swami Vivekananda said, "Thou brave one, be bold, take courage, be proud that thou art an Indian and proudly proclaim "I am an Indian, every Indian is my brother". Say "The ignorant Indian , the poor and destitute Indian, the Brahmin Indian, the pariah Indian, is my brother." (493) Again, at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago he began his speech by addressing the audience as "Sisters and brothers of America..." thereby giving equal status to American men and women. Thus, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi (Gandhiji was critical both of caste based and gender based discriminations between human beings) and Rabindranath Tagore were all actively involved in uplifting the position of the marginalized sections of society.

Tagorian dance-drama such as Chitrangada, Shyama and Chandalika form a marked departure from his previous works in terms of form and aim at arriving at a fusion of two different forms of art-dance and drama. Limitations of the spoken word are overcome using a fusion dance form which borrows from several Indian (Manipuri, Kathakali, Bharat Natyam and Kathak) and International (Javanese, Balinese and Russian) dance forms and beautifully blends these diverse dance forms in to one synthetic whole. However, as Prof. Ananda Lal points out in the introduction to his translations of Rabindranath Tagore's Three Plays "Tagore viewed these final works primarily as drama, not dance and he used with the greatest catholicity whatever dance idioms he found suitable to convey the ideas and images in these plays".(25)

Chandalika is based on a Buddhist legend. Tagore retains the supernatural elements of the legend and emphasizes on the impact of Buddha's teachings on common man. Prof. Bimanbehari Majumdar in Heroines of Tagore (1968) notes that Tagore had based four of his heroines-Malini, Shyama, Srimati and Chandalika on Buddhist legends and cites Dr. Rajendralal Mitra's Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882 as the possible source text of these works.(162)

Chandalika begins with the invitation of a group of women who sell beautiful vernal flowers. They invite young maidens to purchase floral garlands which they claim will add to their beauty and make them more desirable. When Prakriti, the Chandal girl asks for flowers they leave the stage in hurry and in contempt. Being an untouchable girl she has no right to do what other maidens of her age indulge in. She is humiliated for her low birth. Any physical contact, human bonding or business transaction with her is avoided as she is a dalit woman. This is followed by the entry of the curd seller. When Prakriti asks for curd the chorus (representative of society on stage) informs the curd seller about her identity as a Chandalini:

Meye: Oke chuyo na, Chuyo na, Chi,
O je chandalinir jhi-
Nosto hobe je doi-
Se kotha jano na ki.
(Don't touch her. She is a Chandal girl
Don't you know that her touch will contaminate the curd?) (Chandalika, I)

She is shunned as the source of impurity. She is destined to humiliation, suffering, ill-treatment, abuse and contempt because of her position as the lowest of the low. Her birth in a Chandal family is a fact over which she has no control. Yet, her birth becomes the cause of her humiliation. Likewise the bangle seller too refuses to sell bangles to her.

It is important to note that these characters who humiliate Prakriti for being a dalit woman themselves come from lower socio-economic background. Still they humiliate Prakriti as she is an 'Atishudra' and therefore 'achhut' in a caste ridden society.

Three episodes of humiliation which form the opening premise of the dance-drama leave a deep

and lasting impact on the psyche of Prakriti who is a sensitive and intelligent girl. Firstly, she holds God responsible for her plight, refuses to pray to God as it is God who has subjected her to a life of darkness and humiliation. Secondly, she holds her mother responsible for giving birth to her.

Prakriti: jonmo keno dili more-
Lanchona jibon bhor-
Ma hoye anili aye abhishap!
(Why did you give birth to me?)
A life of ignominy and shame
In spite of being my mother you brought this curse to me!) (Chandalika, I)

Her mother is equally helpless. She has no answers to satisfy Prakriti and soothe her. Hence, she leaves her alone with her sorrows which she adds is constructed on a false notion.

It is at this crucial moment that Ananda, Buddha's disciple enters asking for water to quench his thirst. The identity of a Chandalini is thrust upon her. This identity has brought her shame and humiliation without any wrong doing on her part. Prakriti is struggling with binaries of right/wrong, purity/impurity; she is "rapt" (Shakespeare, Macbeth I, iv, 142) in thoughts when Ananda asks for water. She explains her inability to serve the monk citing her chandal origin:

Prakriti: Ami chandaler konna
More kuper bari osuchi
(I am a chandal girl)
The water in my container is impure) (Chandalika, I,)

Ananda provides her with a new understanding of herself. He does not believe in discriminations between man and man. All human beings being God's children are equal in his eyes. His words "you are as human as I am human" (Chandalika, I) usher in a new beginning for Prakriti. She is elated to note her significance as a human being. Her service too is important and required in society. Her new found significance transforms her. She refers this state of self knowledge and self understanding as a "new birth" (Chandalika, I) where she has shed off her previous identity as a marginalized woman. In "Tagore's Chandalika: Tragedy of Selfawareness" Smt. V.W. Suryawanshi writes, "She had so deeply been influenced by the monk's words while pouring water into his cupped hands. She felt that the water was growing to a bottomless sea and that into the water were flowing all the seven seas of the world, drowning her caste and washing her clean of the stigma of her low birth."

Prakriti has become conscious of her status as a human being, in no way inferior to any other. A feeling of self respect has now taken roots in her heart".

She conquers her fears. She turns into a new woman who is not afraid to assert her choice. She desires to possess Ananda, the man who brought about this transformation within her. According to Prof. Sutapa Chaudhuri, "her desire for the monk is the elemental desire of the woman, Prakriti, for the man, Purush..." (STS) She knows that Ananda is a Buddhist monk who has renounced the pleasures of the world in favour of preaching Buddhist philosophy among men yet she is determined to physically possess Ananda. She does not hesitate to take the aid of black magic to forcefully bring Ananda back to her. Her fearlessness, resolution astonishes her mother as well. She too fails to comprehend the changes within Prakriti.

She makes wrong choices. But what is more important is that she is able to assert her choice and stand by the consequences of the same. Again, she is able to voice the needs and desires of her female body. Female sexuality has been and still continues to be a taboo topic in India which is seldom made part of mainstream discourse. Rabindranath Tagore was ahead of her time in making his heroine acknowledge her carnal desires. She not only confesses her desires but works towards achieving the object of her desire. In "Signifying the Self: Intersections of Class, Caste and Gender in Rabindranath Tagore's Dance Drama Chandalika" Prof. Sutapa Chaudhuri writes, "Her arrival at an understanding at who she really is occurs through various forms of rebellion against sexual and social codes. Prakriti is a real woman and not an idealized one who is at once strong and tormented, confident yet deeply conflicted-she is a divided self, torn between her intense yearning for Ananda and her intense guilt at making him suffer at the mercy of Maya's Nagpash Mantra. She only arrives at a true understanding of her own self and the world by journeying through experience, through making errors in judgement, asserting herself and making active choices".

Her mind changes when she watches on her mother's magic mirror Ananda struggling to free him from the forces of black magic. Ananda who has been a symbol of light, knowledge and truth looks tired, fatigued and worn out. Prakriti realizes the true nature of her desire. She desire is not to possess Ananda but

the importance, dignity and respect that he bestowed on her. She begs forgiveness for her deeds and Ananda forgives her and wishes her well being. Thus, finally Prakriti arrives at a true understanding of herself and the world. She travels from ignorance through wrong choice to right reason. The dance drama concludes with Prakriti's journey from self ignorance to knowledge. Emancipation and liberation comes from within. Prakriti is able to attain the same as she can free her mind from narrow confines of caste and class to an understanding of herself as a woman and as a human being with human wants, desires, follies but above all humanity. The play may be subtitled "From Chandaliika to Prakriti" as the dance drama maps her personal graph, her journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from oppression to liberation.

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