



CONTRADICTING THE DISCOURSE OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN TAGORE'S *CHANDALIKA*

ARUN SINGH

Research Scholar, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.



ARUN SINGH

ABSTRACT

Tagore's dance drama *Chandalika* is a literary representation of the controversial subject of untouchability. Prakriti, a Chandal girl, becomes a live character in Tagore's hands. She jettisons the religious and social discourse by which she and her race have been relegated to hellish untouchability, meanness, subalternity and marginality. Her inner consciousness as a human being is rekindled by the Buddhist monk, Ananda. This paper is an effort to revisit the religious and social nuances prevalent in the contemporary society of ancient India. A female subaltern stands as a resolute challenge to the inequitable discourse of untouchability. She becomes a spokeswoman of Tagore's ideal of humanitarianism and universalism. Tagore gives a strong espousal to Buddhism, which rendered shelter to the untouchables and subalterns in its liberal religious gamut.

Key words: Untouchability, *Chandalika*, discourse, Tagore.

Article Info:

Article Received :10/06/2013

Revised from : 11/06/13

Accepted : 22/06/2013

Introduction

In the realm of Indian dramatic writing Rabindranath Tagore carves a specific niche for his plays. For the insertion of universal motifs in his works he is often regarded as a writer of world literature. He draws upon mythology, philosophy, scriptures and ancient history for the execution of his themes and represents some complex metaphors of spiritual enigma. He strives to question the stagnant power structures which construct the metaphors of 'high' and 'low'.

Tagore's two-act dance drama *Chandalika* embodies the spiritual rebirth of an untouchable girl, Prakriti, who is circumscribed by the fetters of her Chandal origin. But when she chances to meet Ananda, the most-loved disciple of Gautam Buddha, she falls in love with him and nurtures an ambition to possess

him. Her love and veneration for Ananda arouses her consciousness and self-esteem.

Untouchability is an ancient malady of Indian society, religion, and culture. In Rigvedic times there were four classes in society — Brahmin (knowledge), Kshatriya (power), Vaishya (money), and Sudra (waste). In a broad context Untouchable may be subsumed in the category of the fourth class. He/she is considered to be a provenance of the feet of the Creator and an emanation of the discriminative discourse of Hindu religion. This powerful discourse subsisted in literature and history of that time which determined the fate of these people. By dint of the construction of such a discourse, the poor section of Indian society was relegated to the metaphoric and geographical gamut

of untouchability. "It is said in Apstamb holy writ (2.1.2.8) that it is a sin to see and touch Chandal and in Gautama holy writ (15.24) it is also said that it is an ill omen seeing him throwing the dead body....Meeting with Chandal is denied on his residence or where he is staying, the study of Vedas is not permitted....In Gautama holy writ (14.30) it is stated that if by touch of any Chandal, the body became unchaste, that can be purified by taking bath with the touched clothes" (Jaideva 173). They did not have right to a proper living according to the classification of *karmas*. They had to live on the fringes of society, being known as 'outcasts'. In Rigveda, there are ample instances which explain the social segregation in Indian Hindu society. Dr. Paramanshi Jaideva makes an effort to validate the time and origin of untouchability :

According to Dr. Ambedkar, the definite age of the origin of untouchability is near about 400 BC. If this thought is considered correct, there should be no mark of untouchability during 600 B.C. and before that, no more doubt is left about as to what was the concept as well as the state of untouchability. But Dr. Ramsharan Sharma accepts that during the period of about 1000 BC, the Aryans hated the Chandals and Polcus and untouchability originated between 600 BC—300 BC. (Jaideva 133)

The story element of the play has been derived from Buddhist scriptures. Tagore reconstructed the story and presented Prakriti, a Dalit girl, as the protagonist. His motif behind representing the story must have been bringing a subaltern / Dalit's elevation to an illuminated and spiritually transformed human being from an ideologically ignoble, subalternised and marginalised human position. The Buddhist monk, Ananda is the elevator and Prakriti is the elevated one. If revisited from a historical perspective, untouchability existed in Indian society in 200 BC, because *Manusmriti*, a monumental work of Indian Hindu religious discourse, was written during 200 BC – 200 C. During these times, Untouchables lived "by making their huts in big trees, cremation grounds, buildings, side of mountains or gardens. Generally the life and social system of untouchable tribes was separate from four class system and of a different sort

seen by people of Brahmneeya culture hatefully" (Jaideva 192).

Tagore seeks to expostulate the very powerful religious discourse by means of a radical ideology in this dance play. He deploys a carnivalesque method to pose a challenge to this marginalising discourse, espoused by Buddhist religion. Prakriti flouts the stringent strictures posed by Hindu religion against her expressive self. She constructs her own identity by defying the strait-laced and inequitable constraints of her religion, caste-system and society.

Prakriti's mother, Maya, reminds her that she belongs to a Chandal family and she can never procure her illusive pursuits; that she is an untouchable. But it does not cast any depressive effect on Prakriti's mind. She is tenacious to contradict this discourse of untouchability and subalternity. She criticizes the die-hard traditions of Hindu religion which produce caste-segregation in society and proclaims that "a religion that insults is a false religion" (Tagore 8).

Tagore's female protagonist spurns the myth of caste and origin telling her mother that "...self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self murder" (Tagore 2). "In Tagore's hands Prakriti becomes a woman living on fringes of human society – a marginalized figure of Hindu society discriminated against for her social background in a caste-segregated world view. By addressing the theme of untouchability through this dance drama Tagore was making an extremely bold socio-political statement against the discrimination of untouchables that in a way supported Mahatma Gandhi's pro-Harijan campaign in the late 1930s India" (Chaudhury 553). She argues that she has been exalted by Ananda i.e. she has been illuminated to recognise her real existence as a human being beyond the discourse of untouchability. Ananda's words 'give me water' reverberate into her mind and she repeats the phrase *ad infinitum*.

The humanitarian attitude of Ananda's rekindles Prakriti's consciousness and elevates her to the level of a recognizable human being. His argument that all human beings are equal at the basic human level, so she is also a human being of equal social status as others are. The water she pours onto his palms is cleansing water — symbolic of her purity of love and

Ananda's enormous benevolence and humanitarian attitude.

'Chandal' is a hybrid progeny, which in Hindu religion is an abominable race. Chandals are considered to be of ignoble and devilish origin. From the ancient times they have been victims of caste-segregation and untouchability. The élite classes manipulated them in accordance with their own interests because they controlled the social ideology. These powerful classes produced a discourse propounding that Chandal is an inferior, mean, abominable and untouchable race; it should be estranged and ostracized from other races, forced to live in ghettos.

Tagore's aim behind this play must have been to scrutinize the uneven and biased structure of contemporary Indian society, culture, and religion; the four-fold structure of classes in Hinduism. He culls the account of Chandalika from Buddhist scriptures and renders it a fictional form to expose the evils of Indian caste-system, untouchability and racism. He presents Chandalika as form of 'Shakti' (symbol of power), who fights the rigorous social and religious system. The occult power applied by her mother drags Ananda into her vortex of passionate love. Although her love for Ananda may be the provenance of a corporeal desire, but this works as an influential force against the ideological hypocrisies prevalent in those times. She emerges as a feminine resistant to the male ideology-maker. She does not concede defeat in her struggle and eventually succeeds into pulverizing the male power. The 'light and radiance' of the male power vitiates when the female opponent takes up the cudgels to subvert him. Prakriti's mother later argues that a woman has sufficient power to defeat the male discourse of caste, race and patriarchy. She fosters her daughter's courage to challenge the stringent power structures:

You are a woman; by serving you must worship, and by serving you must rule. Women alone can in a moment overstep the bounds of caste. (Tagore 50)

The words of the 'Bhikshu' (an ascetic in Buddhist religion), Ananda, prove to be a 'marvellous truth' for the Chandal girl. She craves to render herself to him

"like a basket of flowers at his feet" (Tagore 6). She is an absolute sacrifice to Ananda and wants her mother to call him at her door by means of the primeval earth spell and adorn him with the offerings of pure love. She begins to regard herself as "his (Ananda's) own handiwork, his new creation" (Tagore 11). She nurtures an ambition of exalting herself above the 'dust' of Chandal reality and does not care for the codes of decorum, religion and culture. She resolutely claims:

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 which holds only punishment and no comfort. (Tagore 10)

Prakriti has a great reverence for Ananda; she does not want to agonise him, instead she wants to "bolt out all his suffering, emptying (her) whole world at his feet" (Tagore 14). She aspires to divest herself of her 'blackened shame', which has been imposed upon her race for centuries. Her mother works her primeval earth spell and struggles to call him at her home. She is a devoted mother and the greatest sufferer in the play. Prakriti aims to strip the cloak of her Chandal birth; she does not wish to "return to the illusion of a Chandal birth" (Tagore 19). She poses a challenge to the élitism in Hindu religion. Ananda comes to her door as "a gift of (her) new birth" (Tagore 20) and as a "destroyer of the endless reproach of (her) birth" (Tagore 21).

Prakriti's pursuit of true love is a strenuous effort to find herself as a dignified human being, emancipated from the shackles of caste-segregation, slavery and untouchability. She flouts the élite discourse of discrimination between human beings which is premised upon biased religious ideologies. Cynthia A. Leenerts observes in this regard:

Nearly everywhere, the love experience in Tagore's writings mirrors broad sociological anxiety patterns. A brief example from his dance drama, *Cāndālikā*, will help to clarify this point. In this play the untouchable girl's love, passion and desire for the Buddhist monk, Ananda, has more to do with her submerged anxieties about being an outcast. Her impetuous love for the forbidden object

of desire masks her will to solve this unsolvable riddle of her life. The play acts out Prakriti's *icchāsakti*, her desire not only in its erotic context, but her desire to resolve the contradiction between her humanness and her outcasteness. (Hogan and Pandit : Rabindranath Tagore 160)

Prakriti's following argument imparts her strong resolution and seeks to uncover the veneer of aristocracy concerning élite politics of caste-segregation and her Chandal origin:

Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but I am no slave; plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, but I am no Chandal. (Tagore 6)

WORKS CITED

- Chaudhury, Sutapa. "Signifying the Self: Intersections of Class, Caste and Gender Rabindranath Tagore's Dance Drama *Chandalika* (1938)". *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. 2.4.2010. Special Issue on Tagore. 549-556. Print.
- Jaideva, Dr. Paramanshi. *Dalits in Early Buddhism*. Delhi: Kalpas Publications, 2002. Print.
- Leenerts, Cynthia A., "The Psychology and Aesthetics of Love: Sringāra, Bhāvnā and Rasadhvani in Gora". In *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*. Edrs. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit. Massachusetts: Rosemont, 2003. 130-141. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chandalika*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2006. Print.