

SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY CHANDALIKA

Dr. P Vinatha

Associate Professor in English, SRIT, Anantapur.

11-1-335-1, (upstairs) Aravind Nagar, Anantapur ,India



Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore has a distinct place as a dramatist. He is well-versed in the classics of Indian drama and is alive to the European dramatic tradition. He borrows his themes from Indian mythology, Buddhist legends and other classical sources with the least artistic inhibition or compunction. The short drama *Chandalika* discusses Tagore's lasting regard for the Buddha. The short drama is based on a Buddhist legend. Ananda, the famous disciple of the Buddha, feels thirsty and approaches a well on the way.

Keywords: symbolism, social equality, rational, humanistic aspects

Chandalika:

Rabindranath Tagore discovered the real image of the Indian woman. He is the first to depict her as an intellectual personality. The heroines of Tagore are not weak or humble. They have their own pride and self-respect. They have knowledge of their own self. His female characters like Chitra in *Chitra*, Prakriti and her mother in *Chandalika*, Nalini in *Red Oleanders*, have their own voice. The title of the play *Chandalika*, itself shows that the heroine of the play is a woman belonging to the lowest class of society. The protagonist, Prakriti is a girl who belongs to the untouchable class. She falls in love with Buddhist bhikshu, who makes her aware of herself. Prakriti gets her spiritual comfort. This journey of an untouchable girl from self-ignorance to self-knowledge is shown in *Chandalika*.

A Brahmo-Hindu Rabindranath Tagore had lasting regard for the Buddha. It is based on a Buddhist legend associated with one of the Buddha's disciples named Ananda. John Wilson, in his celebrated work, *Indian Caste* Volume I, observes: "Buddhism in its most important social aspect was a reaction against caste, the tyranny of which multitudes had begun to feel to be unbearable. . ." ² Rabindranath Tagore realized that Indian society was "permeated by religion and living myth, endowed with a psychic landscape having its own concept of time and space."³

The story of an untouchable girl Prakriti is told in Mitra's book, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*. According to the story, Prakriti once gave some water from the untouchables' well to the Buddhist monk Ananda because he asked her for it. The girl fell in love with Ananda. She went to her mother and asked her to use magical powers to make Ananda fall in love with her. Under the influence of the magic spells, Ananda returns to where Prakriti lives. Tagore made use of this small part of the tale which in the original, the *Shardulakarna Avadana*, runs into dozens of pages.

The location of the story is at Sravasti. Lord Buddha had been staying at the garden of Ananthapindad. One day his favorite disciple Ananda, while on his way back from lunch at some house felt thirsty. He saw that a daughter of the chandals, Prakriti by name, was drawing water from the well. He asked for water, she gave. The girl became charmed at his beauty. Finding no other way to have him, she sought help from her mother. Her mother knew magic. She smeared her courtyard with cow dung, prepared an altar, lighted a fire and chanting a magic spell offered 108 sunflowers in that fire. Ananda could not resist the power of the magic and arrived at her house in the night. As he sat on the altar, Prakriti began to spread the bed for him. Then Ananda felt remorse and fearfully prayed to Buddha to rescue him.

Lord Buddha had in the meantime come to know, by means of his divine power, of the condition of his disciple and cited a mantra. Under the impact of that mantra, the magic spell of the chandal woman became weak and Ananda returned to the monastery.

So far the original story underscores the orthodox idea of the superiority of the monk and the lure of lustful women; but the conclusion of *Avadana* story adds the information—supposedly given by Buddha himself—that in her previous birth Prakriti was the daughter of a Brahmin who had contemptuously declined the offer of marriage from Sardulakarna, the accomplished son of the scholarly and wise chandal Trishanku, and after being defeated in the prolonged debate the Brahmin had, at last, give his daughter in marriage to the chandal boy. Trishanku was Buddha himself in the previous birth. Thus the anecdote also highlights a radical attitude to casteism.

In 1933 Tagore wrote a small play *Chandalika* on the basis of this tale. All the dramatic action in this play is revealed in the dialogues of Prakriti with her mother. After much deliberation and prodding by Prakriti, the mother consents to use her magic powers to draw Ananda back to their hovel. As the mother is engaged in this magic, Prakriti reports to her mother how Ananda is fighting the urge to go back to Prakriti's home but in the end is giving in. In 1938 Tagore rewrote the story, but now people with more characters, in the form of a dance-drama which is also called *Chandalika*. Marjorie Sykes translated *Chandalika* into English.

Tagore's play *Chandalika* is a short two-act play. The story of the play revolves around only three characters – Prakriti, a chandal Girl, Ananda, a Buddhist monk and Prakriti's mother who has magic powers. The play is a story of very sensitive girl condemned by her birth to a despicable caste. "Tagore presents a psychological study of a young woman who suffers on account of her vanity and self-consciousness. Tagore highlights the enigmatic character of a woman, the character of being all dominating over possessive to devour all that stand before her precisely, her excessive materialistic approach that ultimately fails".⁵

Prakriti was born in a chandal family; and, like all chandal children, she has been brought up in the belief that she was inferior to all other people and that even her touch would pollute a member of the other classes of society or of the other castes. As usual, Prakriti went to the well to fetch water, finding her nowhere to be seen the mother of Prakriti calls out to Prakriti who should by now come back home. However, hearing her mother's shout, Prakriti comes and tells her that she was sitting near the well. The mother scolds her saying: "Past noon, and blistering sun, and the earth too hot for the feet! Why the very crows on the *amlak* branches are gasping for heat. Yet you sit in the Vaisakh sun for no reason at all!" (Act I, 147)*.

Prakriti in reply to her mother's scolding and questioning, says that she had really been doing penance. When asked for whom she had been doing penance, Prakriti tells her that a few days ago someone had come to the well and asked her to give him water to quench his thirst.

Mother asks: Did you tell him that you are a Chandalini?

PRAKRITI: I told him, yes. He said it wasn't true. If the black

Prakriti feels thrilled and delighted by the Bhikshu's words and she then pours water into his cupped hands. The Bhikshu drinks the water and leaves, but his words have made a powerful

impression upon the girl's mind. At the same time she has fallen in love with the Bhikshu, and in fact, begun to be haunted by the thoughts of him.

On hearing this account of Prakriti's experience, the mother tells her that she had behaved like a stupid girl and that she had been too reckless in her behavior. Prakriti would have to pay a heavy price for such misconduct, says the mother, because Prakriti had forgotten the caste into which she was born. Prakriti ignoring her mother's warning says: "Once did he cup his hands, to take the water from the mine " (Act I, 148).

The mother says that even Prakriti's manner of speaking has changed and that it seems that the Buddhist monk had cast some kind of spell upon her. She then asks Prakriti if she really understands all that she has said. Prakriti replies that the Buddhist monk had come to her for water when he could have got water from any other place in the city of Sravasti through which he had been walking all day. He had come to her at this well instead of going to any other well. It was on her that he had bestowed the honor of quenching his thirst. It was truly a new birth for her. The Buddhist monk had performed a highly commendable act by asking her for water and thus conferring an honor upon her. Evidently, he wanted to fulfill some sacred purpose by coming to her, though he could have gone to some sacred stream to quench his thirst. Prakriti quotes Buddhist monks example of how Chandals have served water to the priestly people. My heart has been dancing ever since, and night and day I hear those solemn tones- 'Give me water, give me water' (Act I, 149). Prakriti has now become conscious of her status as a human being, on no way inferior to any other. A feeling of self-respect or self-esteem has now taken roots in her heart.

Prakriti shows herself to be a very sensitive kind of girl and she proves to be a sensual one too. When the Buddhist monk happens once again to pass the well where Prakriti had given him water to quench his thirst, he does not even look towards the well because he is not thirsty and because he had completely forgotten the incident of his having met a Chandal girl to whom he had imparted the knowledge of her identity as a human being. Prakriti misinterprets the Buddhist Bhikshu's forgetfulness of the whole incident as an insult to her, and she now becomes even more determined than before to have him as her lover. With that object in her mind, she becomes even more insistent that her mother should use her maximum strength as a sorceress to compel the monk to come to her. She even says that her mother's magic is something ancient, as old as life itself, while the *Mantras* of the Buddhist Bhikshu's are raw things of yesterday. These Bhikshus can never be a match for her mother, she says, and that this particular Bhikshu is therefore bound to be defeated by her magic.

In fact, Prakriti goes so far as to say to her mother: "No matter where he goes, you must bring him back. He showed no pity for me. I shall show none to him. Chant your spells, your cruellest spells. Wherever he goes, he shall never escape from me" (Act I, 151). Driven by her desire for the Bhikshu, Prakriti entreats her mother to chant her magic spells in order to bring the Bhikshu to her door to seek her love. The mother demurs on grounds of religion and morality but gives way when pressed hard by Prakriti.

Prakriti's mother gives Prakriti a magic mirror in which Prakriti would be able to see where the Bhikshu is and what is happening to him as a result of the magic spells which the mother would begin to chant. The mother then begins her magic operations, while Prakriti looks into the mirror. The magic of Prakriti's mother begins to take effect. Prakriti sees Bhikshu showing symptoms of a change in his look and behavior. Soon, a conflict begins in Prakriti's mind. This conflict shows that Prakriti is not merely a creature of lust that she is not a brazen woman seeking merely the gratification of her sensual desire, and that she is devoid of all moral scruples. Prakriti sees Bhikshu experiencing the agony of a struggle which has begun to take place within him. As a consequence of the magic spells being chanted by Prakriti's mother, a sensual desire to hold Prakriti in his arms and to satisfy his craving for his flesh has risen in his heart, but he is stoutly resisting this desire and trying to overpower it. As the magic spell continues, the sensual desire in Bhikshu grows stronger and stronger, but the resistance increases too at least in the beginning. A conflict between sensuality and spirituality then begins to take the shape of a storm in his soul and the onslaught of the sensual desire has begun to distort and twist his face which is fast losing its radiance and its serenity.

Prakriti's mother asks Prakriti to look into the mirror and tell her where the Bhikshu is at this time. Prakriti looks into the mirror and then throws it away. She asks her mother to stop and to undo the spells at once. In a tone of great distress, she says to her mother:

Mother, mother stop! Undo the spell now—at once—undo it! What have you done? What have you done? O Wicked, wicked deed! Better have died. What a sight to see! (Act II, 165).

She tells her mother that Bhikshu is very near their house but a great change has come over him. All the light and the radiance, all the shining purity, and all the heavenly glow, which he originally had, are now gone completely. He looks worn-out and faded. It seems that he carries on his back the heavy burden of his defeat. His spiritual self has completely been overwhelmed by his passion and his lust for her. He is coming to her door with his head hanging downwards in shame. Prakriti tells her mother in a categorical manner to put an end to her magic operation and kicks away all the paraphernalia of magic. Then, addressing herself, Prakriti says that, if she is really a human being and not a chandalini, she should not degrade a heroic man.

The mother feels only too glad to undo the magic that she has been working and she, of course, pays the price for having misused her magic powers. At this point, Bhikshu appears at the door of Prakriti's house. Prakriti, overcome by her feeling of remorse and repentance, falls at Bhikshu's feet, seeking his forgiveness. She apologizes to him for having pulled him down into the dust by the force of her mother's black magic, but she also says that this visit by him would become the means of her going to heaven. "(Act II, 165).

The Bhikshu now released from the effect of magic becomes aware of his surroundings and begins to sing a song in honor of his master, the Buddha. The song runs thus:

To the purest Budha, the mighty ocean of mercy

Seer of knowledge absolute, pure, supreme,

Of the world's sin and suffering the Destroyer—

Solemnly to the Buddha, I bow in homage.

The Bhikshu has been restored to his original self with all his spirituality and his dedication to a life of purity and worship.

Prakriti is a combination of beauty and rare intelligence. Throughout the play, the reader can experience her intelligence which is revealed by her speaking. It is because of her intelligence that she quickly imbibes the lesson which the Buddhist monk has tried to teach her. The advising words of the monk inculcate a sense of her identity as a human being. She thinks that the monk's words have caused her to be reborn. She tells her mother that for the first time she had heard the kind of words which the monk had spoken to her and that ordinarily, she would have not dared even to touch the dust under the feet of that man to whom she had given water and who had actually drunk the water. She had so deeply been influenced by the monk's words while pouring water into his cupped hands. She had felt that the water was growing to a bottomless sea and that into the water were flowering all the seven seas of the world, drowning her caste and washing her clean of the stigma of her low birth.

Of the three plays *Muktadhara*, *Chandalika* and *Natirpuja*, *Chandalika* is the shortest play, but the most powerful. It is a poetic drama. Imagery and symbols play a vital role and all the conflict takes place in the theatre of the soul. The Buddhist monk Ananda awakened self-awareness and self-respect in Prakriti by saying, "Give me water" and accepting it in his cupped hands. Prakriti is transformed. The simple words "Give me water" acquire an incantatory effect and run through the fabric of the play as a silver thread. They symbolize her "awakening" and freedom from bondage. "My birth is washed clean," says Prakriti. The new "birth" she refers to is her "self-knowledge".

In *Chandalika* the central operative symbol is that of 'giving'. Prakriti, the Chandala girl, gives water to Ananda. Ananda gives her the awareness of self, her new birth. Prakriti, in turn, longs to give herself (her ego-bound physical self) to Ananda; but this kind of giving goes with possession. Prakriti's mother offers to give her life for the sake of her daughter by undertaking to work her magic spell to drag Ananda to Prakriti. Through sympathy, pity, and love, through her identification with Ananda's suffering, Prakriti realizes that after all this what she had desired to give him is nothing but her 'wretched self'. The play ends with three different 'giving': Prakriti gives Ananda his freedom; Ananda gives her deliverance, a spiritual rebirth which is superior to the ego-birth that he had given her earlier; Prakriti's

mother gives her life itself, her sacrifice helping to bring about the spiritual union (which is but mutual giving of 'mukti') of Prakriti and Ananda.

There are innumerable small and great symbols throughout the drama. The King's son, "hunting" for the "beast" symbolizes all those who see only the flesh of the women but not her soul. "The house of darkness", is the state of ignorance of the self. "Water" is the symbol of love. Autumnal clouds symbolize free-floating things, detached persons like the monks.

Why hurt will I bathe

In the deep waters of my pain's immensity (Act II, 162).

This "pain's immensity" refers to the suffering heart of Prakriti and her unbounded oceanic love. This is a complex symbol. It is a union of souls. Souls unite through the fires of suffering. She also speaks of the fusion, of "gold" and "copper" in the great fire. Gold stands for Ananda and copper for Prakriti, for spirit and earth, for heaven hood and earth hood. That is why she tells him boldly in the end." (Act II, 164).

Thus *Chandalika* is a cosmic drama. Prakriti stands for Nature. Mother stands for the earth, a place of patience, suffering, and understanding. The primal spell may be taken as the "force of attraction: in Nature. Particularly of sex, Ananda stands for spirit, the awakening, and bliss. Even the word "Chandals" is made to represent people with "mean spirits." The union of Ganga and Jamuna is the union of the white and the dark.

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 is changed. She is no more Chandalini. She has got the knowledge of herself. She supposes herself equal to all human beings. She got the knowledge of her own. Now she is a woman, more than the woman she is a human being. Till she was Chandalini, she was not having any expectation from the society but now she is the part of society. She got this knowledge from Ananda.

Tagore has depicted woman as a wife, daughter, sister, mother beloved and so on. But Prakriti is different from all these. Tagore depicts Prakriti as a woman who is asking for her own identity and the authorized recognition of her identity by others, which is denied by the society all along.

Tagore is aware of the fact that orthopractical Hinduism owes its existence to the observances of Brahmins who do not touch anything ritually impure. Tagore often lampoons the Brahminical strict taboo on touching outcasts. Untouchability, as we have seen, is an important theme in *Chandalika*. It depicts the discrimination of the outcasts, exemplified in the main character of the play, the untouchable girl Prakriti, by the higher castes. It also shows a way out of this perpetual humiliation. The Buddhist mendicant Ananda asks the untouchable girl to give him some water from the ritually impure well. This single question of Ananda: *jol dao* 'give me some water' becomes the liberating magic spell for Prakriti. She

begins to imagine another possible way of life, a life outside obedience and self-depreciation before persons of a higher caste. Thus Prakriti shows in her newly found self-confidence not only that she has lost her fear of discrimination, but also that she is capable of taking her destiny into her own hands. In other words, she emancipates herself, while the source of her emancipation is, in fact, the message of Buddha – conveyed to her by Ananda – that nobody is born impure and nobody needs to undergo social ostracism and discrimination. In *Chandalika* Tagore visualizes the Buddhist teaching of universal love. *Chandalika* exemplifies Buddhist individualist self-emancipation. It is a play about personal choices and self-fulfillment.

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