



Review Article

A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Chandalika as a Psychological Play of Intense Spiritual Conflict

S.Mohammad Shafiullah M.A M.Phil M.Ed PGDFE (PhD)

Asst Professor in English PVKN Govt College (Autonomous) Chittoor-517002, India

*Corresponding Author

S.Mohammad Shafiullah
Email:

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Abstract: The play 'Chandalika' by Rabindranath Tagore is not a play on the caste system, but shows a conflict in the mind of each of the three characters namely Ananda, the Buddhist monk and Prakriti, an untouchable girl and also Prakriti's mother who was a magician and possesses magical powers. The story of this play is based on a Buddhist legend about Ananda, a famous disciple of Lord Buddha. Ananda, according to the legend, had aroused in a Chandal girl, an untouchable, a sense of her human dignity by asking her for water to quench his thirst; but the girl while pouring the water into his hands, falls in love with Ananda. Tagore had made a very skillful use of this legend to write a play having a profound psychological and spiritual significance. The whole interest of the play centres round this conflict which takes place in Prakriti's mind, due to her repentance and remorse over what she has done to the holy monk by pulling him down to the dust from the heights of spiritual bliss. In Ananda, we can see the conflict of choice that takes place between his religious duty and his newly-awakened desire for a woman. We can also see a similar conflict in Prakriti's mother when she applies her magical powers on Ananda, in her desire to please her daughter Prakriti and the demand of her conscience not to use unholy methods to please her daughter.

Keywords: Realism, Conscience, Morality, Magic, Agonizing, Chandal, Spiritualism.

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INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore was the greatest poet, dramatist, playwright and short story writer among the Indian writers of English. His fame as a poet in English rests chiefly on his "The Gitanjali", which is a 'transcreation' of the Bengali original. It was with this work that he achieved international fame and recognition and awarded the Noble prize for literature. He is one of the greatest lyric poets of the world and Edward Thomson calls his handling of poetic prose an "Impeccable metrical achievement." His thought and imagery are Indian and his poetry is in the tradition of Indian devotional poetry. His message is spiritual, both Hindu and universal at one and the same time. In his poetry, Indianness acquires a universal significance.

The word 'Chandalika' means a girl of the lowest caste or an untouchable girl. The story of this short but deeply moving play is based on a Buddhist legend about Ananda, a famous disciple of Lord Buddha. Ananda, according to the legend, had aroused in a Chandal girl a sense of her human dignity by asking her for water to quench his thirst, but the girl while pouring the water into his hands, falls in love with the Buddhist monk. Prakriti begins to feel uneasy in her mind soon after Ananda, the Buddhist monk has left her. His brief exhortation to her was not only given her a sense of her own identity as a human being but has given a new meaning to her life. As she has fallen in love with Ananda, she expects him to come again one day and ask her again to give water to quench his thirst. But, whenever he happens to go that way, he pays no attention either to the well or to the girl, who

has quenched his thirst some time back. It seems to her that, he may have forgotten her completely. Prakriti now prevails upon her mother, who is a sorceress, to use her magic powers to bring Ananda, the Buddhist monk back to her house and to create in him a sexual desire for her. The mother begins to chant her magic spell aimed at forcing Ananda to experience a sexual desire and a liking for prakriti and return comes to her to seek the gratification of his desire for her. Here, the play depicts the states of mind of all the three characters and it is the unfolding of those states of mind which constitutes the real interest and the real significance of the play.

Rabindranath Tagore is a realist and his plays are realistic in nature. Tagore's plays realistically depict the progress of an individual's awareness and consciousness. His play does not emphasize the development of a plot, but rather develops a pattern of symbols which reflect the fluctuations of mood in detail. In this play also there is a conflict which takes place in the minds of Prakriti, Ananda and Prakriti's mother.

The protagonist in this play is Prakriti, a girl belonging to the untouchable class. Initially, the conflict arises in the mind of Prakriti, the Chandal girl, whose awareness of herself as a human being has been aroused by Ananda's assurance to her that, she is a human being like all others and that she should not hesitate to give him water to quench his thirst. In the process of giving water to him and as a result of the new awakening in her mind that she is a human being like all others, she also falls in love with Ananda and then she forces her mother to employ her magic powers to

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bring Ananda to her. But, when under the influence of that magic, Ananda is coming to Prakriti's house, Prakriti begins to develop a sense of guilt in wanting to bring about the spiritual downfall and moral degradation of the pure Buddhist monk. This conflict becomes an agonizing one, but at the end Prakriti's conscience proves more powerful than her lust for Ananda. At the last minute, she asks her mother to withdraw the magic and release Ananda from its grip. Ananda is saved not as in the legend, by the intervention of Lord Buddha himself, but by the change of heart in Prakriti who asserts her own will power to crush the lust within her. The whole interest of the play centres round this conflict which takes place in Ananda between his religious duty and his newly awakened desire for a woman and also the conflict in Prakriti's mother between her desire to please Prakriti and the demand of her conscience not to use unholy methods to please the reckless girl, are also very interesting and illuminating. Actually, this is a play which depicts a threefold conflict, or a conflict in the mind of each of the three persons of the play.

The state of mind of the three characters is revealed to us at every important stage of the story as it moves forwards. There is Prakriti, who has, for several days been feeling miserable because of her passion for Ananda who had made her conscious of her identity as a human being but had then gone away. The next time when Ananda passes that way he does not even look towards the well where he had asked Prakriti for some water to quench his thirst. He does not look towards the well because the incident of his asking for water from a Chandal girl had been a very trivial one from his point of view and he had forgotten all about it. But, for Prakriti, Ananda had become an object of adoration and love and his subsequent indifference to her wounds her self-esteem, which she had developed as a consequence of Ananda's brief exhortation of her. When Ananda has begun to fall under the influence of the magic of Prakriti's mother, the expression on his face also begins to change from one of serenity to that of perplexity and then of torment. Eventually, Prakriti undergoes another change, so that, from a longing for remorse and repentance over her action in resorting to a sinful method of gaining her low end. Prakriti's mother too undergoes an acute mental struggle in the course of her chanting of the magic spells. At certain points, the mother is on the verge of collapse because of her physical and mental exhaustion in chanting the spells, and also because of the deep remorse which she is experiencing in using an unholy method of subduing the Buddhist monk. All the time, as we go through the play, our suspense keeps mounting; and the end of the play brings a big surprise for us. At the end, we are left gasping for breath as we behold the Chandal girl rising to the height of self-sacrifice, her mother bravely paying the price of her sin in using her black art to attain a dishonourable purpose, and the Buddhist monk heaving a sigh of relief at his escape from sin and singing a song in honour of the Buddha. Thus the play 'Chandalika' is undoubtedly a play depicting the states of

CONCLUSION

Thus the play 'Chandalika' is undoubtedly a play depicting the states of mind of all the three characters who figure in it; and it is the unfolding of those states of mind which constitutes the real interest and the real significance of the play. It is not the working of Prakriti's mind alone which interests us. The working of Ananda's mind is equally important; and the working of the mind of Prakriti's mother is also important. Everything in the play contributes to the development of the theme which is the awakening of a sense of her identity into a feeling of excessive self-importance. An exaggerated or inflated sense of one's own importance would inevitably lead to frustration and a painful recognition of one's own limitations. Each one of us is important; but the importance of each one of us is limited and restricted to by the importance of others. The play rigidly and rigorously adheres to this theme; and there is neither a word too many nor too few in it. Indeed, Rabindranath Tagore appears in this play as a master craftsman.

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