

Tagore's conception of Women in *Chandalika*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is a poet, prose writer, short story writer, and essayist and a novelist. Besides, he is an artist, educationalist and a humanist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for his anthology of poems entitled 'Gitanjali' (Song-offerings). It was originally written in Bengali and later translated into English. He wrote a number of volumes of poetry like "The Gardener", "The Crescent Moon", etc. He was a master in the art of the short story. He was a pioneer in this form in Bengal. Tagore is unique as a writer of the short story. Tagore's short stories reveal his sensitive mind and powerful feelings of the poor, the helpless and the neglected.

Chandlika is a short play about an untouchable girl named Prakriti. *Chandlika* means a girl born in a low caste family, regarded as an untouchable by sophisticated society. Untouchability has been a curse in India. Mahatma Gandhi was in the forefront to fight this evil. Tagore is a philosopher, poet who believed in the equality human beings. Tagore also was a poet who raised his voice against the traditions and customs that divided people. In spite of the effort of these great souls, there are still discriminations made on the basis of religious beliefs and castes. Ignorance and superstitions are the main reasons behind such practices. As the masses receive more education, these evils can be rooted out from society.

There are two different ways of achieving equality in society. One way to end castes is to bring the high born to the level of the low castes. The other way is to lift the status of those who are born low. Tagore believes in the latter method, which is a more positive one. In this play, Ananda, the young and believed disciple of Budha meets Prakriti, a Chandlika, at the village well. He asks her for some water to drink. She is unwilling to give him water because she is a Chandlika, and according to the social custom, she cannot give water to the stranger. The belief has been that the one who drinks water from a Chandlika girl would become unclean. This gives him an opportunity to explain to her about the illusion she is in. the monk tells her that no human being is born high or low.

So he asks her not to degrade herself. He tells her that self-degradation is a greater sin than self-murder. These words make her aware of her rights as a human being. This revelation increases her self-respect. Her joy finds no bounds.

The action of the play develops with Prakriti's itching desire to possess Ananda's love exclusively. Ananda's love exclusively. She forces her mother to use her magical spell on Ananda so that he may return to her. The characteristically despicable nature of the untouchable is seen here. Both Prakriti and her mother show some ignoble trait in their character. Lack of education, ignorance, and selfishness can be seen in their behavior. Without any scruples they work together to pull the monk down from the highest spiritual position he is in. This is a hideous action indeed. As the witchcraft reaches the climax, Ananda is shaken. His countenance shows a horrible expression of suffering. His mental agony worsens. He is no more the holy, graceful man she has adored. The fury expressed on his face frightens her. She asks her mother to undo the spell. But it is too late. Her mother dies, but before her death, she begs forgiveness from Ananda. With her mother's death Prakriti is spiritually reborn.

Through the play Tagore conveys the message that the Dalits should be helped and encouraged by the socially privileged people to bring them to their level. At the same time it becomes clear that it is not easy to transform as they are backward in many respects. Tagore stresses the fact that uplifting of the lower class should not be at risk of bringing down those who are spiritually and intellectually at a high level. It is through her defeat that victory comes to Prakriti. She ultimately realized her folly and begs forgiveness, and becomes a true devotee of the saintly Buddhist monk.

As the theme of the play is about an untouchable girl, the title "Chandalika" is very apt, Tagore's purpose of writing the play is to expose the injustice meted out by society towards the people who are born in a low caste. Prakriti has shown how the stigma of low birth can be removed through self-consciousness. When the Buddhist monk Ananda drinks the water poured into his cupped hands by Prakriti, who is a Chandalika, he breaks the barrier that has existed between the untouchables and the so called touchables. The word "Chandalika" is no more a detestable term.

The traditional Indian way is to give women respect and reverence. Kalidasa and the other great Indian writers have done this. Tagore also follows in the line with this tradition. In "Chandalika" there are only three characters, two of whom are women, Prakriti and her mother. Both are portrayed as beaming with vehement emotions. Their thoughtlessness and self-conscious behavior may be attributed to the weakness characteristic of women. But once they realize their folly they are full of remorse and beg forgiveness for their irresponsible behavior. Tagore seems to take an idealistic view of women.

Prakriti is a member of untouchable caste. Her self-consciousness is the main theme of the play. She is not treated on the par with the other girls in the society. She suffers a lot due to the stigma with which she was born. It was then that a Buddhist monk, Ananda by name, approaches her near the village well and asks for some water. She tells him that she is not worthy to give him water as she belongs to a low caste. The monk tells her that he belongs to the same human family as she does. She further tells her that self-humiliation is a greater sin than self-murder. These words have a profound effect on her. She develops a feeling of adoration towards her. She longs for his presence again. Ananda spoke the words casually as he would speak to anybody. He was speaking a general truth. Prakriti took it as a case of personal attachment to her. She waits for him near the wall several times. But he does not come to her. Even when he passes by, he does not pay any attention to her. This makes her angry. As she is a woman of the world, and like any other woman, her anger grows into fury.

Through Prakriti Tagore brings out two aspects of women. As an untouchable girl, she is disregarded by all. Ananda raises her to the position of any other woman in society. It is he who has made the revelation that one does not become an untouchable by birth. She is grateful to him for creating a sense of self-respect. This gratitude soon changes into love and she yearns to give herself entirely to him. But her love cannot be taken as a sensual one. It is pure devotion. But when Ananda does not respond, she becomes violently angry. Women, compared to men, are more emotional. Love, wrath and fervor are the emotions that become deep and strong in women. It is difficult to get rid of them. This is what happens in Prakriti's case. She cannot escape from these emotions as they have become deeply rooted in her. At a particular stage, she realizes that love cannot be forced, and true love cannot expect anything in return. This knowledge comes to her very late. Once she realizes this, she offers Ananda pure adoration.

Prakriti's mother is simple, ignorant woman. She has accepted the fact that she is an untouchable and should not wish for what is beyond them. But she is a mother. As a mother, she is to look after the interests of her daughter. To make her daughter, she is prepared to go to any extent. Knowing that she is conversant with the art of using magic spells on others. Prakriti asks her to use this evil trick against Ananda. At first she advises her daughter and tells her that it is sinful to do so. She tells her about the king's son who came deer-hunting sometime ago and made offer of love to her. If she does it on him, the worst that can happen is that he will kill her. To cast spells against a holy man will certainly bring a curse upon her. Ananda has attained spiritual power as a result of years of training and years of training and practice. But no argument can convince Prakriti. On her instance, the mother agrees to start witchcraft against Ananda. She cannot be adjusted as a bad woman, for she has great admiration for Ananda, but she is a mother, and it is the mother's duty to make her daughter happy. The mother dies at the end.

These women characters are not portrayed as possessing very high ideals. They are to be seen as members of an untouchable community, and as such their thoughts and behavior cannot be expected to be lofty. In their own way they possess certain good qualities. Prakriti feels sympathy towards Ananda, who suffers much as a result of the magic spell. She also feels sorry for having tormented him. The mother also has respect and devotion to Ananda. But as a mother, she has to make her daughter happy.

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