

Signifying the Self: Intersections of Class, Caste and Gender in Rabindranath Tagore's Dance Drama *Chandalika* (1938)

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Abstract

Much has been said about the way Tagore views his women in his poems, essays, novels and drama. Yet it is the dance dramas of Tagore, a genre quite unique in his time and milieu, which portray the radical nature of Tagore's conception of women and the maturation of their selfhood. The dance dramas illustrate Tagore's bold and perceptive experimentation with various literary forms and techniques and the radical nature of his ideological orientation. Among the dance dramas of Tagore, *Chandalika* has a special place as it foregrounds the theme of female desire in an untouchable girl, a tabooed subject in his times, indeed even now in Bengali writings. This paper tries to show how Tagore uses the nuances of the dance form to showcase the intersections of caste, class and gender as well as the evolution of selfhood in Prakriti, the Chandal girl.

[**Keywords:** Dance drama, Class, Caste, Gender, Chandalika]

Once a highly respected and revered art form, Indian dance had fallen into disrepute under British colonialism. The then educated urbanites despised dance as an art form and did not allow dance, in any form whatsoever, in their society. The educated elites in particular, were very much against dance of any kind which they considered gross and unrefined. It was seen by the Victorian British rulers as a debauched pastime fit only for prostitutes or rustic village folk. Hence, educated middle-class Indians did not dare to allow their daughters to learn dance any more. To perform on public stage was even a greater taboo. The staging of '*Notir Puja*' ('The Dancer's Prayer') in 1927 marked the return of girls from respectable middle-class Indian families to the stage as dancers. By his efforts, Tagore dispelled the social taboo once attached to dancing and regained full social acceptance by putting it back on the centre stage.

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."¹ He tried to portray this unique reality through modes and methods indigenous to Indian culture. According to Indra Nath Choudhuri, Tagore's central idea was

"...to free the present- the now, and make it part of the eternal time; and in his dance dramas this is fully realized. Tagore's increasing interest in dance in the last phase of his life reflects his deepening sensitivity to the ecstatic, spiritual aspect of dance, exemplified by the transcendent rhythm of dance which constitutes the flux and the timeless, eternal order of the universe."²

In his dance dramas, Tagore uses the dance form in a subtly nuanced manner –where dance itself becomes a liberating force- it is both a liberating and an expression of identity and self assertion in women. Along with the indigenous Indian dance forms, both the classical and the folk forms, he uses the ‘other’ dance languages which have had roots not merely in a national but in a trans-national culture. This alternative dance movement originating from Tagore’s vision removed the halo of purity and high spirituality of classical dance both from the performer and the performance. It brought the dance and the dancer closer to its audience, into pedagogy and became a vehicle through which contemporary ideas and predicaments could be articulated and could reach the masses.

Dance dramas by Tagore examine alternative, non-classical artistic experiments in the realm of theatre dance inspired by the western traditions of theatre, the folk theatre tradition in Bengal as well as the classical dance forms in India. They open up a space in which representation of Indian women through bodily performance troubles notions of cultural purity and origin and offers instead ‘impure’ but nevertheless powerful cultural texts.³ In his dance dramas like *Chandalika* (1938) he explores the intimate links between dance and the processes of female identity formation. Through his dance dramas Tagore provided his audience alternatives of female representation – his female protagonists are subversive as they defy the accepted norms of the then society and instead present women confident in their choices of life that they themselves make. Thus Tagore used the dancing body—always open to interpretation and suggestion—as a site of political resistance as it inscribes new meanings by constantly participating in and subverting the norms of culture. Tagore’s 1936 essay *Nari* (Woman) urged women to step out of the precincts of their home to pursue education and cultivate their intellect stressing the importance of their autonomous self development.⁴ Tagore chose the icons of marginality – warrior, untouchable, courtesan —as protagonists in his women centred dance dramas “whose performing bodies could potentially disrupt conservative notions about female gender, sexuality and social position. The women who danced in Tagore’s experimental dance-dramas in 1930s Bengal in full public view, as opposed to being confined to the inner precincts of their home, offered ‘impure’, ‘inauthentic’, non-classical yet powerful alternatives of being modern Indians. These hybrid female dancing bodies, at once passive subjects of a nation under colonial domination and active agents of change, therefore simultaneously enacted and troubled Indian nationalist notions of culture and art.⁵ This shows his feminist orientation in the politics of woman’s emancipation in the nationalist era.

Tagore’s dance dramas enter into direct contact with his poetic material, between the intangible and the tangible, between the intangible reality of poetry and the tangible unreality of our daily lives. They occupy a position where religion, poetry, music and dance, merge into one another. In Tagore’s dance dramas, plain speech progressively develops into heightened speech and then draws itself up into emotionally charged songs and the corresponding action is

transformed artistically into dance. Songs and dances in these dramas are an extension of the dialogues and action, not having any separate role to play. In the dance dramas, dance becomes a part of the songs as the natural outcome of a literary consummation as it were. The dance dramas illustrate Tagore's bold and perceptive experimentation with various literary forms and techniques and the radical nature of his ideological orientation. Unlike previous Bengali dramas, Tagore's dance dramas emphasize a fusion of lyrical flow and emotional rhythm tightly focused on a core idea. Tagore emancipated dance from the formal, geometrical patterns of some set movements, infused new life and spirit in the dance forms and rendered a supple touch of graceful elegance to them. He conceived of mingling drama with dance in a subtle manner so that it would have a profound impression on the psyche of the audience. Theatre, songs and dances were finely blended in an unprecedented way in these dance dramas amalgamating in themselves Indian tradition and culture as well as western philosophies. Incorporating several dance forms in his dramas, Tagore's dance dramas present a unique blend of music, rhythm and expressions. In them, he has freely adopted in his own way the style and techniques from Manipuri, Kathak, Bharat Natyam, Kathakali, folk dances and even European dances like the ballet, as and when necessary. Tagore's dances are soft, supple, graceful and spontaneous with a poignant effect like the rhythm of the natural flow of life. In his dance dramas, the dances do not follow any strict convention or set pattern of the intricate classical dances of the past. Rather, these dances portray the inner significance or essence of the songs through the elegant gestures and expressions. In the dance dramas, Tagore lets the dances depict the story in a lucid and graceful way creating an exquisite fusion of fiction and romantic imagination. In *Chandalika*, for instance, the gestures and expressions of the dance-drama do not need the help of words or speech. The dances aptly express the essence of the songs. In these dance dramas, dance is seen as soul's mirror that gives expression to the soul's yearnings and aspirations, the ecstasies and agonies, the dreams and frustrations.

The dance dramas of Tagore, a genre quite unique in his time and milieu, portray the radical nature of Tagore's conception of women and the maturation of their selfhood. Dance dramas written by Rabindranath Tagore can be used as points of entry into a discourse on feminism. In *Chandalika* Tagore uses dance as a subtle and nuanced form of self expression for Prakriti; without the dances the desire for selfhood in Prakriti would remain inarticulate. It is through the free and fluid movements of the body that Prakriti as a woman expressly articulates her desires- emotional, physical and spiritual - at once liberating the female dancing body from the strict rules of classical dance as well as traditional society that viewed dance as impure and demoralizing. In this dance drama, to watch Prakriti, the protagonist, dance is to hear her heart speak as it were. It is through dance that Prakriti gains her freedom from the constricting binaries of pure/impure, body/ soul, ethical/unethical, self/other that bind her. Dance thus

becomes a medium that liberates the soul and the body from a repressive culture that negates her identity, self worth and female desire. Tagore believed that music and dance have the potentiality of revealing a person's true self. Thus he uses both song and dance as an artistic application of the dramatic form as well as its subject matter. He wanted to use dance as the essential means for the natural exposition of the self. In *Chandalika*, Prakriti, in an outburst of self expression, gives shape to her joy with dance; she reveals her true self, feels liberated and moves into a state of blissful ecstasy. Her movement is artistically transformed into dance as her words are realized in songs. Maya, her mother expresses her astonishment in finding a total change in her daughter's speech. Somebody has charmed her speech, Maya exclaims. Prakriti's fossilized inanimateness gets freedom in the total expansion of the sky. In the structure of the dance drama, Prakriti's saga of life develops into a symbol of liberation.

Tagore's dance dramas try to etch out complex interlacing of aesthetic, socio-cultural and political domains- one in which spirituality is neither completely rejected nor overtly expressed but subsumed, negotiated and redistributed within a secular vision.⁶ Tagore's concept of art in his dance dramas like *Chandalika*, has a conscious and critical engagement with the social and political contexts. They are innovative cultural texts that re-visit, re-address, re-align the role of art as a fixed construct and the associated binaries of purity/impurity, regression/progression. His use of dance reflected changing attitudes towards the role of women in society and therefore was a vital tool in the process of identity formation in women. His portrayal of women in dance dramas like *Chandalika* or *Chitrangada* is a reflection of the idea of the 'new woman' that had emerged from the time of the Bengal Renaissance. Tagore's dance dramas usually revolved around a central female protagonist, like the untouchable girl Prakriti in *Chandalika*, who could not be located within a specifically Hindu world view. The thrust of his narrative was not on the spirituality of these characters, but rather on their very human, internal conflict. In *Chandalika*, as in his other dance dramas, Tagore avoids the glorification of traditional male heroes like Lord Buddha or Ananda. The narrative is woven around the play of emotions primarily within Prakriti. Tagore's poetry brings out both the strength and the excruciating inner dilemmas of his protagonist. It is highly significant that Tagore made his central character an untouchable girl who not only dominates the narrative through the strength of her personality, but also shapes the course of action through her own choices. Prakriti, like Shyama, and Chitrangada, is a fractured self who is denied legitimacy due to her caste and class and banished from the life of a normal human being. 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 not an idealised 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. It is the autonomous self development of the woman (*atmasakti*) that Tagore hints at in narrating the story of an untouchable girl. In her search for the true self, as Prakriti transcends from darkness of social degradation into the light of signifying her own self as a woman, she travels through the three states of life – the ignoble discriminations faced in her material life, the world of memory in which Ananda has shown her respect as a human being, as well as the ultimate dignity of her Self that she acquires at the end by understanding the true nature of her desire – she is liberated when she comprehends the unified pattern of these closely intertwined three worlds. As Purkayastha opines that in choosing Prakriti to occupy the central space in his narrative, “Tagore’s preference for focussing on the human rather than the spiritual attributes of his protagonists is clearly manifest.”⁷

In *Chandalika*, Tagore uses an ancient Buddhist legend for his play, but treats it in a highly imaginative way, giving it a modernist interpretation. In Tagore’s dance drama, the central protagonist is Prakriti, the untouchable girl, not Lord Buddha or his disciple Ananda as in the original story. In Tagore’s hands Prakriti becomes a woman living on the 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. In Tagore’s *Chandalika*, Prakriti becomes obsessed with Ananda as he is the first and only person outside her caste who treats her as a human being of equal standing instead of shunning her as an untouchable. For Prakriti, Ananda embodies liberation, a person who has shown her a way out of the stultifying darkness of self negation, who has created a revolution in the way she perceives the world and the way the world perceives her. Prakriti now desperately wants to possess the man who has given her the taste of freedom from the chains of social degradation that bound her soul.

In *Chandalika*, the dialectics of Prakriti’s selfhood and desire gets problematized by the intersection of class and caste with gender. This adds not only to the complexities of her selfhood but also problematizes the attainment of that selfhood through the expression of her desire for Ananda. For Prakriti, the socio-culturally imposed selfhood is that of an untouchable, an outcaste; her desire would only be ratified if it is expressed within her caste and class. To desire for the companionship, indeed, the love of a monk is like reaching for the stars for the untouchable girl. It is a taboo no one should dare to cross. Rejected by others for her caste, her untouchable status, Prakriti at first learns to negate her societal self identity; but nevertheless she questions the efficacy and fairness of her social standing and silently rages against the Almighty for this unjustness.

She remains a victim to her socio-culturally determined selfhood as she internalizes the social stigma attached to her caste and class. Yet her questionings show her inner consciousness of her self as a human and thus foreground her agency and power that remains as a latent force inside herself till Ananda awakens this slumbering, latent selfhood and ignites her passion for him.

It is through Ananda that Prakriti first learns to see herself as a human being in her own right, she learns the meaning of dignity – she learns what it is to be a woman, to serve others as an equal. With her awareness of herself as a woman comes the first awakening of desire, which turns into obsessive passion for the man who has shown her respect as a human being for the first time in her life. By giving water to the thirsty monk, it is as if Prakriti has satisfied her own thirst for self respect. It is a kind of self ablution as it were, cleansing her from the self negating stigma of being an outcaste. Ananda has given her the power to serve others, the power to give life (water), nourishment to thirsty travellers. It is in his eyes that Prakriti has seen herself as an equal to all the other human beings. She now gains an understanding of her selfhood; an awareness of her identity as a woman, and an acknowledgement of her self worth. Her desire for the monk is the elemental desire of the woman, *Prakriti*, for the man, *Purush*, and it comes only with her awareness of her still nascent womanhood. With her desire as a female comes courage, a daring even to bring Ananda back to her at any cost, by any means. Prakriti now takes the help of Maya, her mother, an exponent of black magic. The most potent realization of her selfhood comes when Prakriti calls the post Ananda episode as her 'new birth'. She is in euphoria about what she thinks of as a kind of baptism into humanity and her female desirous self.

'e notun janmo, notun janmo, notun janmo amar...

shiure uthlo deho amar/ chomke uthlo pran'

(it's a new birth for me, a new birth, my new birth... my body awoke with a jolt/ my soul got conscious all of a sudden). (Tagore, Rabindranath, *Gitabitana*, Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 1999, vol.3 p718. Translations mine.)

This realization of Prakriti's selfhood is intermingled with the conscious negation of her socially imposed caste and class as well as an acknowledgement of herself as a woman proud of her self worth. In her obsession to possess Ananda, Prakriti makes an erroneous choice. She implores her mother, Maya to use magic to bring Ananda back to her. The magical powers of Maya contest with Ananda's spiritual powers until he is forced against his will to come back to Prakriti. Seeing her desired man in painful agony, broken and defeated in spirit, his soul entrenched in darkness under the spell of the black magic that Maya uses, Prakriti understands her error in dragging Ananda, her symbol of light and truth, to a baser level where he becomes a mere shadow of his former self. When Maya's black magic forces Ananda to her door, Prakriti realizes that her desire is not for the person that the monk represents but for the affirmation of her own identity as a female self equal to others in all respects. Through material

desire Prakriti reaches a spiritual desire. Ananda's request, "Give me water," besides indicating his physical need symbolizes water's regenerative image common in many religious traditions. In the Indian context, a holy man asking for water from an untouchable violates a social as well as a religious norm. To receive and to give food or water were sacrilegious for both. The monk's extraordinarily radical request awakens Prakriti's awareness of her own innate Self. Through the universal image of water, Tagore intertwines the ideological revolution reflected in the social, religious, and political scene of his own time. Prakriti's self-assertion imbued in desire is manifested in her love for the young monk. Infused by eros, Prakriti's love ascends to agape through dedication and repentance to liberation. It is through love that Prakriti transcends her socially imposed caste and ultimately signifies herself as a radical human being.

Notes

1. Indra Nath Choudhuri, *Theatric Form of Tagore's Dance Drama and Its Symbolism*: in Chaudhuri, Bhudeb and K. G. Subramanyan (eds.) *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988, p. 130
2. *ibid*, p.130.
3. *Warrior, Untouchable, Courtesan: Fringe Women In Tagore's Dance Dramas*: Prarthana Purkayastha, South Asia Research, Vol.29 (3), Sage Publications Ltd., 2009, p. 255.
4. *ibid*, p. 267.
5. *ibid*, p. 268.
6. *ibid*, p. 258.
7. *ibid*, p. 267.

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