

REALISATION OF FEMALE SELF IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S DANCE DRAMA *CHANDALIKA* (1938)

Dr. R. Sangeetha

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Hindusthan College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

ABSTRACT

The importance and splendour of Indian art forms of dance were rejected by British colonialism, particularly under Victorian English rulers. It was a game reserved for prostitutes or rural country inhabitants, according to them. As a result, the educated urbanites and elites of the time were strongly opposed to dance, which they considered uncouth. And the educated middle-class Indians refused to teach their daughters to dance. Dance performances on a public platform were even more frowned upon. The dance play *Natir Puja* (The Dancer's Prayer) by Rabindranath Tagore, which premiered in 1927, attracted girls from respectable middle-class Indian households to pursue careers as dancers. By reintroducing dancing to the centre stage, Tagore was able to eliminate the social stigma that had previously surrounded it and restored complete social acceptance. In Tagore's artistic works, Indian culture was pervaded by religion and living myth, gifted with a psychological landscape with its own idea of time and space. In his artistic works, he was able to capture the uniqueness of Indian civilization using forms and approaches particular to Indian culture.

Keywords: Female self, Chandalika, Tagore, Indian Culture, Dance

Tagore employs dance as a liberating force and an expression of individuality and self-assertion in women in his dance-dramas in a delicately nuanced manner. By fusing indigenous Indian dance traditions, both classical and folk, with other dance languages of trans-national culture, he created an alternative dance movement that stripped classical dance of its halo of purity and high spirituality. Tagore brought dance and the dancer closer to the audience, transforming it into a vehicle for articulating contemporary concepts and issues and plainly communicating messages to the public. Tagore investigated these non-classical artistic experiments in the world of theatre dance through dance plays, which opened up a place where the representation of Indian women through bodily performance questioned cultural conceptions of purity. He connects dance to the stages of female self-realization in *Chandalika* (1938), one of his dance plays.

Tagore's feminine portrayal in the form of his female characters gave women the confidence to make their own life decisions. By continually delighting in and undermining the rules and regulations of culture and society, Tagore used the dancing body as a challenge and a place of political resistance. In his article *Nari* (Woman), Tagore advised women to leave the limits of their homes to pursue education and improve their intellect, emphasising the necessity of self-development. In his women-centred dance works, Tagore's heroines were icons of marginality such as untouchable or courtesan. Their onstage bodies shattered traditional ideas about female gender, sexuality, and social status. These hybrid dance dramas, which were presented in Bengal during the 1930s, upended Indian nationalist, cultural and artistic conventions.

His dance-dramas incorporate religious themes, poetry, music, and dance. Tagore progresses from a simple speech to a heightened speech, which is followed by emotionally charged songs accompanied by artistic dance. In these dramas, songs and dances are an extension of the speech and action. He intertwined drama with dance in a subtle way to leave a lasting effect on the audience. This fusion of drama, music and dance was influenced by both Indian and Western beliefs. Tagore's dance-dramas combine poetic flow, music, rhythm, and expressions uniquely. In his dance dramas, he included styles and methods from Manipuri, Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, folk dances, and even European dances such as ballet. His dances defied Indian classical dance's rigid conventions and predetermined patterns. However, the exquisite actions and expressions match the songs' main themes. These dances serve as a mirror for the female spirit, reflecting her aspirations and agonies, desires and frustrations.

Tagore employs dancing in *Chandalika* to depict the heroine Prakriti's quest for selfhood and self-expression. Her body's free and flowing movements reveal her emotional, physical, and spiritual desires. Dance liberates her from the confining binaries that bind her: pure/impure, body/soul, ethical/unethical, self/other. As a result, dance becomes a vehicle for liberating the soul and body from a restrictive culture that denies her identity, self-worth, and desire as a woman. Tagore believes that dance is a crucial tool for the natural expression of one's self. Prakriti reveals her own self, feels liberated, and enters into a state of ecstatic pleasure in *Chandalika*, in an eruption of self-expression via dance. As her words are fulfilled in music, her movement is creatively converted into dance. Self-liberation is symbolised by this dancing.

Tagore's dance-dramas influenced public perceptions of women's roles in society, paving the way for women's identity construction and the emergence of the concept of the "new woman." In *Chandalika*, he identified the untouchable girl Prakriti as the key female protagonist, who had no representation in Hindu culture. This dance drama tells the story of the protagonists' extremely human interior difficulties, excluding

their spirituality. Tagore foregoes the praise of traditional masculine heroes such as Lord Buddha or Ananda in order to focus on the representation of Prakriti's emotional play. The play's lyricism highlights her inner power as well as her inner conflicts. Prakriti, an untouchable girl, is known for her strong attitude and her ability to make her own decisions.

Prakriti, who is denied legitimacy because of her caste and socioeconomic class, defies sexual and societal norms to attain the status of a regular human being. She's a real woman, torn between her overwhelming desire for Ananda and her remorse over putting him at the mercy of Maya's Nagpash Mantra. Through the story of an untouchable girl, Tagore emphasises the woman's autonomous self-development (Atma Sakti). She travels through the three states of life – the discriminations she faces in her material life, the world of memory in which Ananda has demonstrated her respect as a human being, and the ultimate dignity of herself that she acquires at the end by understanding the true nature of her desire – to transcend the darkness of social degradation into the light of signifying her own self as a woman. When she realises the cohesive pattern of these three interwoven realms, she feels emancipated.

Tagore exploits an ancient Buddhist fable in *Chandalika* to give it a modernist interpretation in an innovative way. Prakriti is a neglected character of Indian society in Tagore's hands, discriminated because of her socioeconomic origin in a caste-segregated world view. Tagore was making a bold socio-political statement against the prejudice of untouchables by tackling the issue of untouchability through this dance theatre.

Prakriti discovers Ananda as the first and only person outside her caste who regards her as a human being of equal status in Tagore's *Chandalika*. Ananda represents liberation to Prakriti. He changed her perception of the world as well as the world's perception of her. As a result, Prakriti wishes to possess him to be free of the shackles of societal degradation.

The junction of class, caste, and gender complicates Prakriti's aspiration for selfhood. Prakriti's socio-culturally imposed selfhood is that of an untouchable, an outcast, and her desire will only be realised if she expresses it inside her caste and class. Desiring a monk's affection and company is like desiring to reach the stars. It is a red line that no one should dare to cross. The rejection she experiences as a result of her caste and untouchability causes her to question her cultural self-identity and scream silently against the Almighty. These interrogations reveal her inner awareness of herself as a human being. She learns about the dignity and equality of her womanhood from Anand. Prakriti had fulfilled her own need for self-respect by offering water to the thirsty monk. Her deliberate repudiation of her socially imposed caste and class is intertwined

with her awareness of selfhood. Her longing for the monk is the primal desire of a woman for a man, and she bravely dares to lure Ananda to her at all costs and by any method. Prakriti makes a bad decision in her quest to possess Ananda. She begs her mother, Maya, to use magic to reunite her with Ananda. Maya's magical abilities compete with Ananda's spiritual abilities until he is forced to return to Prakriti against his will.

Prakriti realises that she has committed a mistake by dragging Ananda, who is in excruciating anguish and his spirit is trapped in darkness under Maya's control. She recognises that her want is for the validation of her own identity as a female self equal to others in all ways, not for the monk's persona. Prakriti achieves spiritual desire through material desire. Prakriti's most powerful awareness of selfhood comes when she refers to the post-Ananda incident as her "new birth." Prakriti transcends her socially imposed caste and ultimately identifies as a radical human being through love.

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