Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chandalika* and the Subaltern Consciousness

*Debi Prasad Misra*
Research Scholar  
NIT, Durgapur  
&  
Assistant Professor  
Panchmura Mahavidyalaya  
University of Burdwan  
India  

**Dr. Arindam Modak**
Assistant Professor  
NIT, Durgapur  
West Bengal  
India  

http://www.ijellh.com
Abstract

Much has been written about Tagore’s play, *Chandalika* which is based on a Buddhist legend Tagore came across while studying Ranjendra Lal Mitra’s *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature*. According to the story Ananda, the famous disciple of the Buddha, approaches towards a well to ask for water from a Chandalini, a young untouchable girl. Prakriti, the Chandalini, serves him water from her pitcher and falls in love with him at the first sight. Her passion to possess Ananda compels her mother to cast a magic spell on Ananda and to drag him to her house. The spell proves stronger and Ananda is dragged to the couch spread for him by the Chandalini. Ananda prays to the Buddha to save himself from this shame and remorse. Consequently, Buddha breaks the magic spell and frees Ananda, who walks away from the Chandalini, as pure as he came.

The play, for many, has been either a play of spiritual conflict or a psychological drama. Such readings of us however obliterate the most social concerns of the play like casteism and sexuality which make the play more as a social document than a mere stage show of entertainment and aesthetics. Though Subaltern Studies as a critical theory was unheard of in Tagore’s time, it is interesting to revisit and reintrospect Tagore’s *Chandalika* from the Postcolonial perspective. My paper will try to look at Tagore from the Subaltern standpoint, especially with reference to Gramsci’s notion of the ‘subaltern’ and the postcolonial issues of subjectivity and identity-formation.

Key Words: Postcolonial perspective, the Subaltern, Subjectivity, Identity-formation
The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. . . . Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (Gramsci 54-5).

The term *subaltern* which refers to marginalized groups and the lower classes or persons rendered without agency by his or her social status is first used by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* and made popular in postcolonial discourse by a group of intellectuals led by the renowned historian, Ranajit Guha. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her lecture “The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work” defines ‘Subalternity’ as “the position without identity”. Subaltern Studies, as a specific interdisciplinary theory emerged in the early 80s in a dissident left milieu, where sharp criticism of orthodox Marxist practice and theory was combined with the retention of a broad socialist and Marxian horizon. “There were obvious affinities with the radical-populist moods of the 1960s and 1970s, and specifically with efforts to write ‘histories from below’.”(Sarkar; 401) The new trend sought to explore the neglected dimension of subaltern autonomy in action, consciousness and culture.

Tagore’s *Chandalika* is a powerful critique of Indian society that ignores and deprives a large community of its fundamental rights and dignity, labelling them as subhuman untouchables. The dominant social groups of the high caste Hindus are much to be blamed for the dastardly acts of inhumanity and cruelty. The narrative of *Chandalika* is an evidence of the subaltern protest against Brahmanical hegemony and it explores possible ways of redemption. The story parallels powerfully the anti-caste movements associated with Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar.

But Tagore does not lose sight of the fact that the Subaltern is held in subjection through its internal weakness and through its acceptance, as evident in the slavish mentality of Prakiti’s mother, Maya, of the moral, social and political ideologies of the ruling class. Maya internalizes and consents to her subordination as ordained. This subjectivity is not just externally imposed but is ingrained in the subaltern culture and consciousness. The mother considers Prakiti’s new birth following the awakening of her consciousness as madness. She chastises Prakiti’s newly gained enthusiasm after her
meeting with Amanda. But Prakiti wishes to transcend her socially-imposed status of marginality by dismissing the ideology of the Brahminical hegemony and by declaring that self-dignity is the birth-right of every being: Don’t humiliate yourself... self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder (Tagore, *Three Plays*, 148).

The passivity of Maya facilitates effective hegemonic control, for the ruling class – the dominant Brahmins are able to maintain their position through the consent of the untouchables without recourse to open coercion. Disunity and the absence of collective consciousness are the debilitating hallmarks of subaltern condition. Untouchables participate in their own subordination by subscribing to the identity constructed by the dominant class. Prakiti is hostile to fatalistic and positivistic determinism so much characteristic of her mother. Although peasants and other subaltern groups share what Gramsci calls ‘senso commune’, “this is a rag-bag of assertions and beliefs”, according to David Arnold, “with little internal consistency or cohesion.” (Chaturvedi 29) By themselves the peasants and the untouchables have only fragmentary elements of class consciousness. Prakiti’s release from the stigma of the low caste is conditioned by her definitive choice of rejecting Hinduism and embracing the equality-based principle of Buddhism. This is a political action, almost identical to Ambedkar’s denunciation of caste-ridden Hindu religion and his iconic burning of *Manusmrita*, the text considered to be the source of Hindu casteism.

Prakiti’s identification with Buddhism is natural in the sense that she receives the just dignity of her being from Ananda, the follower of Buddha. Ananda is both her guide and lover, if not the liberator. Ananda is the first man outside the inviolable circle of the casteist world of Prakiti to make her aware of her dignity and humanity, despite being an untouchable. The Buddha’s message of equality immediately electrifies the veins of Prakiti, realizing her immense worth as a human soul, infinitely powerful and immensely noble. Naturally, her first impulses of love moves towards Ananda, the man who makes an aberration of the hegemonic ideologies that had thitherto stifled the existence of Prakiti and enclosed her into a death-in-life existence.
Prakiti embraced Buddhism because it is the site of counter-ideology capable of fighting the dominant and vested ideals of Brahminism. When asked by her mother, “Have you no respect for religion (Tagore, *Three Plays*, 154)?” Prakiti says defiantly, “How can I? I respect him who respects me. A religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags” (154). Historically speaking, Buddhism was derived from Hinduism and it was, like Jainism, a reformed sect of the Hindu religion with insistence on equality and renunciation of materialism. It was a deviant form that opened up the possibilities of resistance to the dominant and dogmatic practices of the cast-saddled and scripture-laden Brahmanism. John Wilson, in his celebrated work, *Indian Caste*, 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…” (Wilson 278). More lively and accommodative than the other existing forms of religion, it makes room for the subaltern’s search for liberty from the octopus of Hindu society.

If consciousness is largely determined by material conditions, subaltern preference for Buddhism is necessarily consistent with its material experience. Buddhism reflects the needs and aspirations of the subaltern’s own way of life rather than that of the hegemonic class dominated by the representatives of high castes. Religion, here, is not self-deception, or false-consciousness, but is, for Prakiti, a specific way of rationalizing the world and the real life. Amitav Ghosh remarks perceptively that Sufism, Bhakti, and other spiritual practices are the “subversive counter-images” (Ghosh 263) of orthodox religions. In a conversation with Dipesh Chakraborty he points out, “Anti-hierarchical thought in India goes back through the *bhakti* period to the Buddha and Mahavira…” (Qtd.in Gopal 159)). For Ambedkar in the twentieth century, Buddhism provides the general framework for the construction of the subaltern consciousness and political activity.

Prakiti is resurrected, as it were by the daring act of Ananda who came and stood before her, and said, “Give me water” (Tagore, *Three Plays*, 148). Chandalika was initially hesitant to offer him water, as she was languishing in the dungeon of social stigma and
untouchability that restricted her soul and humanity: “I’m a Chandalini, and the well-water is unclean”(148). But the magic of Ananda’s speech — “As I am a human being, so also are you and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirst” (148)— makes Prakiti conscious for the first time that she is not without dignity and nobility. Once she has realized her worth, she will not go back to her past identity as a chandalini. She won’t listen to her mother who says, “You were born a slave. It’s the writ of Destiny, who can undo it” (158)?

Chandalika opposes her mother’s passivity and she resists the Brahmanical ideology that discriminates humans on the basis of caste and birth: “Fie, fie, Mother, I tell you again, don’t delude yourself with this self-humiliation –it is false, and a sin. Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but I am no slave; plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, but I am no Chandal”(158).

More importantly, Prakiti is a woman who assumes the agency- the ability to act and exert power. Even though she is constrained by the larger socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions, she is capable of making choices and taking action. Unlike her mother, she is not reduced to the pathetic sense of victimhood. She urges her mother to cast the spell of the black magic on Ananda and thereby to bring him, the man of her love and desire to her. “Make him come to the very end, make him come right to my bosom” (159)! Prakiti “refers to her mother’s black magic as the primeaval spell, the spell of the earth, which is far more potent than the immature sadhana of the monks” (Kripalini144). Clearly, we witness here a conflict between love and spirituality, between the earthly desires of Prakiti and the principle of non-attachment of Ananda. Here again, Tagore deviates from his source and doesn’t bring to the fore the miraculous power of the Buddha who in the source story rescued his disciple, Ananda before he succumbed to the raw lust of a Chandal woman. Tagore astutely shows the power of the mother’s magic and by extension, the power of female sexuality in dragging Ananda from his altar of contemplation. Prikiti, the name itself, is the marker of human nature, of natural desire and she is shown to be victorious over Ananda’s power of resistance to the female force.
But Tagore doesn’t debase Prakiti by projecting her as a mere maniac of lust. When she has arranged her fragrant bower of union with her lover, she recoils in agony as she sees in the magic mirror Ananda standing near her cottage in abject misery, deformed by the pangs of carnal passion. Prakiti exclaims in desperation, “O Mother, Mother, stop! Undo the spell now—at once—undo it...What a sight to see! Where is the light and radiance, the shining purity, the heavenly glow? How worn, how faded, has he come to my door” (Tagore, Three Plays, 165)?

Interestingly, Tagore uses dance as a medium of Prakiti’s self-expression. Prakiti articulates her awakened feelings through rhythmical movements of her body. For Tagore, dance is the living means of unravelling complexities and aspirations residing deep in the recesses of one’s natural self. Dance is not mere involvement in dialogue. It is “performative utterances” (Austin 233), to borrow a phrase of J.L. Austin, to situations through a total commitment of the body, the mind and the heart. It is doing something, rather than simply reporting on or describing reality. It is a process of engagement with and opposition to the given reality through which the identity of Prakiti is formed and revealed. Her spontaneity and elementary passions are the positive outbursts of the subaltern commitment and energy—the raw elements that leads her from subjection to emancipation.

The performing gestures are used consistently by Prakiti as an act of subverting the fossilized and, therefore, static norms of the society. The dancing body becomes the site of her resistance and an expression of her vital female power. The point is: her enormous capacity tapped in the terrains of sexuality and feminity can be understood when we consider how Tagore deliberately deviates from the ancient texts of his source material and omits the role of the Buddha in releasing Amanda from the black magic of the Chandalinis. The ‘black magic’ may be the euphemism for raw female sexuality to which Ananda ultimately surrenders. Doesn’t the straightforward narrative of the play hide a sub-text of the conflict between sexuality and spirituality in which both Prakiti and Ananda participate? Are we supposed to believe that chanting few mantras could drag a sane man like Ananda at the door of Prakiti? Isn’t it that Ananda, the young disciple of Buddha found the vital appeal of the subaltern woman irresistible? Isn’t it that the ancient
Buddhist story camouflages and confabulates these issues intimately related to subaltern experience and assertion in order to pay homage to the Buddha, the Saviour?

While rewriting on the same story at a crucial time when Gandhi and Ambedkar are launching the crusade, in their own ways, against untouchability and social ostracism, Tagore vastly departed from the Buddhist legend. He was not unaware of this social problem that prevailed even in the Upanishadic days. Digging up India’s ancient epics, Tagore relates in the play how Sita’s bathing water was supplied by Guhaka, the untouchable—a point attesting to the existence of the untouchability as well as the dignity of the subaltern achieved through service in ancient society. Tagore wrote scores of poems published in Gandhi’s magazine Harijan in 1933 on the subaltern lives. Significantly, Tagore’s Chandalika was written in 1933. Poems like “Satyakam Jabala”, “Sweet Mercy”, “The Sweeper”, and “The Sacred Touch” articulate his concern on the Subaltern question. Often misreading these poems, critics often go to the point of saying that Tagore fails to problematize the social reality due his preoccupation with spirituality. But Tagore never sacrifices his social awareness and makes his art simply a vehicle for his ideas of soul-making. Satyakam is embraced by Goutama because he has the noble attributes supposedly possessed by the Brahmins only. Tagore dignifies Raidas and Kabir because of their simplicity and humanity. In so doing Tagore wishes to uphold human values, irrespective of caste and creed. His point of emphasis is that dignity of a person lies in his character, not in his birth. Prikiti asks a pertinent question: How can he (Ananda) attain his Mukti until I attain mine (Tagore, Three Plays, 148)? If we assume that Anada belongs to a liberal and enlightened representative of the upper class, is not Prakiti airing here the social views of Rabindranath who has unequivocally said more than once that “S/He whom you are falling downward, is dragging you down; s/he whom you have kept behind, is dragging you behind” (Tagore, Gitanjali, 86). A society can’t thrive without harmony and equality among all its members—high and low, the elite and the subaltern.

As to the charge that Tagore has disabled the issues of caste and gender in his preference for spirituality to which Prakiti’s restless soul eventually is anchored, suffice is it to say that Tagore places equal emphasis on the demands of both physical needs and spiritual longings in the character of Chandalini. He believes that the one complements the other.
The subaltern struggle for liberation has the inevitable trajectory of vehement passion at the beginning that gives way to a tranquil enlightenment of cosmic consciousness. Moreover, Tagore believes that a real change doesn’t occur through certain material structures or conjunctions, but through the development of heightened consciousness. Nowhere is it truer than in the character of Prakiti. Liberation comes from within and without.

Tagore’s drama does not attempt, however, to valorize the power of religion and the miraculous power of the Buddha, who in the legend rescued his disciple, Ananda, caught in the trap of a lusty untouchable woman. Contrary to the Buddhist legend from where the story is taken, Tagore’s drama is all about Prakiti highlighting her contradictions, limitations and possibilities. The presentation and exploration of such subaltern theme is a conscious attempt on the part of Rabindranath to overturn the existing notions and values of postcolonial Indian society and to establish the centrality of subaltern aspirations and actions in the historical process of nation-building. In inviting closer investigation into subaltern society, Tagore leaves open the possibility of a more positive subaltern dimension than he is personally able to execute.
References


