

## Agency of Dalit Subaltern and Resistance in Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Chandalika*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to analyze the agency of Dalit subaltern people and their resistance in Rabindranath Tagore's Chandalika. The play has been mostly interpreted either as a play of religious conflict or a psychological drama. Such readings have however obliterated the most social concerns of the play like casteism and the agency of the Dalit people which make the play more as a social manifesto than merely stage performance and realm of aesthetics. This study looks at the issue of marginalized Dalit subaltern people focusing on how the true agency is denied to them and made hegemonic. The denial of agency to the subaltern people weakens their spirit of resistance and compels them to accept domination hegemonically. Maya, the mother character in the drama is hegemonized character in the play and gives consent to the caste system to function intimidatingly upon them. On the other hand, the performative gestures that are used consistently by Prakriti is an act of resisting the petrified and, static norms of the society. Thus, this paper focuses to explore the agency of subaltern people and throws light on the conception of resistance using the theoretical insights of Antonio Gramsci, Spivak and Michael Garnet.*

**Keywords:** Agency, Dalit, Hegemony, Resistance, Subaltern

### Introduction

Chandalika, as the name signifies, is about a chandal girl belonging to the lowest untouchable caste. Filled with agency and spirit of resistance, the character of Prakriti, the central character portrays the nature's qualities, she is bold, ready to resist, endearingly tolerant, which provokes the image of a mother nature. The story catalogues

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the resistance of a marginalized girl infused by the sense of agency and infused by the life-force of resistance.

This paper tries to inspect the issue of agency and resistance in Tagore's Chandalika. In this play Prakriti appears as the crucial character – a marginalized figure of Hindu society discriminated against or detested for her social background in a caste-discriminated world view. By addressing the theme of untouchability, Tagore makes an extremely bold socio-political account against the discrimination of untouchables in the contemporary Indian society which is still relevant in the socio-politico-cultural trajectory of modern India. Tagore's deep concern with the notion of untouchability, as an evil curse on the Indian society is the main plunge of the drama. The social ambiance of the drama can be better analyzed glancing it through the critical perspective of subaltern studies focusing on the notion of agency and resistance.

The term subaltern 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 *The 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" (as cited in Sarkar, 2002). 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" (qtd. in Sarkar, 2002). The new trend sought to explore the neglected dimension of subaltern autonomy.

Resistance is a political act. It is the product of ill-treatment and mostly been a consequence of subjugation. Resistance arises out of utmost anguish against unbearable atrocities unleashed by the hegemonic powers. To seek freedom from the hegemonic oppression, there is a strong and inevitable need of resistance from the subjugated sections in all possible manners. Welleck (2016) writes:

The act of resistance not only demands weapons to conquer the power holds, but it also calls for courage and a vigorous heart to confront the hegemonic oppression and systematic violence. The concept of resistance is literally meaning

to stand against entered the social sciences primarily from politics and culture. (p. 50)

The concept of resistance is in fact meant for the victimization by social practices and social institutions in the socially tumult nations. It is defined as an effort for survival and it becomes an imperative weapon for the Dalit subaltern people to create their space and identity. The certain terms like pain, fear, violence, courage, death and power, repression all leads to resistance. It becomes an imperative defense power for the subaltern society to react against the power and distort the power zone by an act of resistance by the potential exercise of agency and inner self.

### **Textual Analysis**

Tagore's play *Chandalika* is a two act play teemed with the issue of agency of Dalit people and the resistance against the hegemonic oppression. The plot of the play revolves round only three characters – Prakriti, a chandal Girl, Ananda, a Buddhist monk and Prakriti's mother who has magic powers. The play is a story of very sensitive girl condemned by her birth to underprivileged caste. Tagore presents a psychological study of young woman who suffers on account of her vanity and self-consciousness. Tagore highlights the impenetrable character of Dalit subaltern, the character of being all dominating over possessive to devour that entire stand before her precisely by using her agency, her excessive materialistic approach that ultimately leads her to join the path of spiritual redemption. The play begins with the confrontation of Prakriti and her mother over the topic of Ananda's inspiration of Prakriti as a living, breathing human being and not as an untouchable, despicable, socially neglected chandal girl. Prakriti was born in a chandal family; and, like all chandal children, she has been brought up in the belief that she was inferior to all other people and that even her touch would pollute a member of the other classes of society or of the other castes.

This play is structured by the social consciousness of the dramatist that Indian society was saturated by religion and living myth, endowed with a psychic landscape having its own concept of time and space. The drama tries to portray this unique reality through social modes and methods distinct to Indian culture and the social realism. According to Choudhuri (2012), 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.” (p.130)

In his drama, the dramatist uses the dance as an artistic form of revealing the agency of Dalit subalterns – where dance itself becomes a liberating force— it is both a liberating and an expression of agency and self assertion in the marginalised subaltern figure. Tagore’s *Chandalika* is a powerful critique of Indian society that ignores and deprives a large community of its fundamental rights and dignity, labeling them as subhuman, Dalit, untouchables who do not have self- agency and capacity to resist. The dominant social groups of the high caste Hindus are much to be blamed for the reprehensible 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 unquestioning mentality of Prakiti’s mother, Maya, of the moral, social and political ideologies of the ruling class. Maya internalizes and is hegemonic to her subordination as ordained from the generations. 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 meeting with Ananda. But Prakiti wishes to transcend her socially-imposed status of marginality by dismissing the ideology of the Brahminical hegemony by the virtue of her agency as a human being questing respect and dignity 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, 1954, p.148).

The passiveness and the status quo of Maya enables 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 duress. '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, 1971, pp.54-5).

Further, the playwright connects various social, cultural, and moral issues in the play *Chandalika*. Interlinking multiple things and revealing the social concern is the great

quality of an art. Chaudhuri (2012) supports this argument as “‘Interrelation’ is the quality of synthesis in a work of art:

It is also a feature of a poet’s entire oeuvre, especially Tagore’s, the dynamic set of relations are vital to the creation, and understanding, of his work; and it refers to the inseparability of the various cultural strands that produce a creative tension in authors such as Tagore” (p. 129).

The play catalogues many minute things specially the bifurcation and use of agency to bring out the character of Prakriti in particular and the awakening of Dalit Subaltern consciousness in general. Prakriti develops a new sense of self-respect of her right as a human being by the virtue of her agency and of her worth as free being, which is an evolutionary merge towards a new consciousness. She realizes her true agency, which happens by the transformation of her inner self or in a sense, her self-purification through the blessings of Ananda. Therefore, her attempts to unite with Ananda by transgressing the oppressive constraints of social codes, is in a larger way, an effort to attain higher level of freedom and to exercise agency.

Disunity and the absence of collective consciousness are the weakening stamps of subaltern condition. Untouchables participate in their own subordination by subscribing to the identity constructed by the dominant class. Prakriti is hostile to defeatist and positivistic determinism so much characteristic of her mother. Although peasants and other subaltern groups share what Gramsci (1971) calls ‘senso commune’, “this is a rag-bag of assertions and beliefs”, according to David Arnold, “with little internal consistency or cohesion.” By themselves the peasants and the untouchables have only fragmentary elements of class consciousness and they lack the conscience of agency. Prakriti’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 thereby is capable of resistance against the teleological world view ordained in untouchability. This is a political action and the use of agency, almost identical to Ambedkar’s denunciation of caste ridden Hindu religion and his iconic burning of Manusmriti, the text considered to be the source of Hindu casteism. Prakriti’s identification with Buddhism is natural in the sense that she receives the just dignity and thinks of exercising her agency being illuminated from Ananda, the follower of Buddha. Ananda is both her guide and lover, more than all he is the liberator and the mentor to culminate the seeds of agency and resistance. Ananda is the first man outside the unviable circle of the casteist world of

Prakriti to make her aware of her agency and resistance, despite being an untouchable and stigmatized as Dalit. The Buddha's message of equality immediately excites the veins of Prakriti, realizing her immense worth as a human soul, infinitely powerful and immensely noble as a free being.

Prakriti embraced Buddhism because it is the site of counter-ideology capable of resisting the dominant and consigned ideals of Brahminism. When her mother asks, "Have you no respect for religion (Tagore, 1954, p.154)?" Prakriti says defiantly, "How can I? I respect him who respects me. A religion that insult is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags" (p.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. . ." (as cited in Gopal, 2004, p. 278). More lively and accommodative than the other existing forms of religion, it makes room for the subaltern's search for agency from the vantage of Hindu society.

More importantly, Prakriti is a character who realizes her agency- the ability to act and exert power. In this sense, we can say that Prakriti is guided by true agency and even decides to change religion. She is not guided by the external constraints and factors. In this deal Garnet (2017) writes; "when a person is a subject to the unauthorized control of something else-such as coercion of another agent-then that person lacks freedom" (p. 5). Hence, Prakriti as a resisting character appears as a being guided by inner freedom. 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" (Tagore, 1954, p. 159)! Prakriti "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" (qtd. in Kripalini, (2000)). In this way we witness a conflict between love and spirituality, between the earthly desires of Prakriti 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 capitulated to the raw lust of a Chandal woman. Tagore judiciously shows the power of the mother's magic and by extension, the power of female sexuality in dragging Ananda from his altar of contemplation. Prakriti, 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.

Prakirti who is the main character of the play 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, does not 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" (Tagore, 1954, p. 158). The dialogue between Prakriti and her mother sums up the past and the present history of untouchability and the complexities of the deep scars left by such exclusion:

Mother: Be warned, Prakriti, these men's words are meant only to be heard, not to be practised. The filth into which an evil fate has cast you is a wall of mud that no spade in the world can break through. You are unclean; beware of tainting the whole outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your own place, narrow as it is. To stay anywhere beyond its limits, is to trespass.

Prakriti: A religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer. I am afraid of nothing now. (p. 150)

Prakriti's fascination with Ananda is also one of the hallmarks of instigating the passion of resistance and agency in the drama. Prakriti's obsession with Ananda is not abided out of a physical lust, but the intense desire of a marginalized woman to passionately possess a man from the mainstream who treats her as an equal and to achieve mobility. For her, Ananda embodies liberation, a person who has shown a way out of the deadening darkness of self relegation. This is also a mode of resistance and 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. She has a sense of agency and strange quest for its fulfillment. She says, "My mind is saying it over and over again – fulfilled! It was for this that I heard those wonderful words, "Give me water". Today I know that even I can give. Everyone also had hidden the truth from me. I sit and watch for his coming today to



give, to give, to give everything I have” (Tagore, 1954, pp.153-154) .The trance that Prakriti experiences when treated as an equal has been powerfully presented through intense language: I may truly call it my new birth! ... My heart has been dancing ever since, and night and day I hear those solemn tones ... “Give me water, give me water.” (p.149).This is the state of happiness in Prakriti’s life and she feels as if she has accomplished something valuable on the ground of using agency and resisting against the dogmatic structure of untouchability.

Chandalika as a social drama is based on a Buddhist legend written (1933) in Bengali. It was later adapted by the author himself into English. Ananda, a Buddhist monk stops one hot day and asks Prakriti, an untouchable girl for some water. Prakriti is surprised that the monk is willing to take water from a girl of low caste, the monk speaks a few kind understanding words. As a catchphrase ‘water’ emerges as a symbol, a force that washes out social dogma of Dalits and stereotyping in the cultural tradition of India. Thus Prakriti celebrates the potentiality of agency to resist against the social dogmas and to bring triggering change in the society. Prakriti’s words in the given quote suggest the moment of happiness which Prakriti attains using her spirit of resistance and true agency. “Only once did he cup his hands to take the water from mine. Such a little water, yet that water grew to a fathomless, boundless sea. In it flow all the seven seas in one, and my caste was drowned, and my birth washed clean” (Tagore, 1954, pp.148-149).

Thus, by giving water to the thirsty monk, it is as if Prakriti has satisfied her own thirst for self, attains a level of agency and inner freedom. Ananda has given her the power to serve others, the respect and power to give life (water), nourishment to thirsty travelers. It is in her eyes that Prakriti has seen the jovial hope of freedom that entails her to resist against the dogmas of untouchability in the contemporary Indian society.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Tagore portrays the Dalit Subaltern character Prakriti from the Chandal community audaciously and magnanimously looking for attaining her fullest agency and resisting against the traditional modes of social praxis of untouchability. Though Tagore was not a Dalit, he presents the awakening of the Dalits and as such realizing their inner self here in the drama. The story of Prakriti speaks the triumph of marginalized and subaltern society. At last, she realizes that she is not a Chandal girl but a human being packed with self-asserting agency and capacity to resist the ill-practices that segments the society in the backdrop of universal humanity.

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