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## PORTRAYAL OF 'NEW WOMAN' – A FEMINIST READING OF TAGORE'S *CHANDALIKA* AND *NATIR PUJA*

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### ABSTRACT

Tagore's portrayal of underprivileged women like Chandalika, Chitrangada or Srimati is a reflection of the idea of the 'new woman' that had emerged from the time of the Bengal Renaissance, and feminism in Rabindranath challenges the traditional view of women as the weaker sex. He 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. So he chooses the icons of marginality-warriors, untouchables, dancing girls in his women centred dramas to portray the radical nature of his conception of women and the maturation of their self hood. This paper is a humble attempt to showcase how the underprivileged women protest for establishing their identity as 'new women' as reflected in Tagore's *Chandalika* and *Natir Puja*.

**Keywords:** Underprivileged, new woman, identity.

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Modern age is considered to be the age of feminism. Women in the modern period have proved their equality to their male counterparts crossing the barriers of society. Literature being the mirror to society, takes the charge of registering the voice of protest and proclamation, of self realization that was inevitable to reconstruct the human identity of those who are neglected, oppressed and deprived.

The term "New Woman" signifies the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new Indian woman tries to assert her rights as a human being to have her status equal to man in society. She struggles to be financially independent and intellectually strong enough to break the fetters of age old submission and mute suffering. Instead of depicting the

sacrificing, submissive women with tears in her eyes, the men of letters have given revolutionary picture of the "New Woman", which do not confirm to any code of conduct of the traditional society.

Feminism is also not intoxication in Bengali literature for here the women traditionally step out of proscriptive boundaries. To Shri Ramakrishna, woman was the universal mother. To Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Women's role is threefold- the daughter, the mother and the most seductive, the consort. In Bankim Chandra's novel, sometimes the woman is an activist who wields justice and power with self controlled detachment. Mahasweta Devi's woman characters are also activists who break through the tradition of home, hearth and veil to fight the establishment with whatever weapons they can wield. In Ashapura Devi's novels, women are all domestic characters who of course revolt against

the dogma ridden society and Tagore's portrayal of women like Chandalika, Chitrangada or Srimati is a reflection of the idea of the 'new woman' that had emerged from the time of the Bengal Renaissance, and feminism in Rabindranath Challenges the traditional view of women as the weaker sex. He 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. So he chooses the icons of marginality-warriors, untouchables, dancing girls in his women centred dramas to portray the radical nature of his conception of women and the maturation of their self hood. My paper aims to showcase how the underprivileged women protest for the identity of self to the realization of the self as reflected in Tagore's *Chandalika* and *Natir Puja*.

In Tagore's celebrated tragedy of social protest *Chandalika*, the character of Prakriti Who is a Chandal by caste is a manifestation of the oppression born out of caste discrimination. She is shunned by those around her because of society's terrible practice of oppressing a sector of its own people due to perceived inferiority. One day a Buddhist monk appeared and asked her for some water to quench his thirst, he brushed aside her hesitance and said God made all man equal and her origins were inconsequential and proceeded to drink water offered by her. Prakriti, the Chandal girl, reconstructs her identity with the human cult encouraged by the monk and this encouragement becomes an obsession in her life. In her obsession, Prakriti becomes impatient to drag the monk back to her door with the magic of her mother. Her terrible resistance even at the risk of her life justifies that in spite of being an outcast, she retains the sparks of human will to reframe her identity. For her, it was the question of her existence, her belongingness and the preservation of self identity. She vehemently cries out, "I fear nothing any longer except sink back again, to forget myself against in the house of darkness." (*Chandalika* 153)

Prakriti fears of the loss of identity while her mother fears to trespass the limitations of birth and religion. Her mother always tries to warn her saying that "You are unclean, beware of tempting the outside world with your unclean presence. See that

you keep to your own place, narrow as it is. To stray anywhere beyond its limit is to trespass."(150) But it was Prakriti's first celebration of the glory of her inner will that could not be diminished with the shades of religious conventions. Her craziness give an insight into the emotional turmoil going on within her mind and it was her affirmation of her will against caste ridden social practices. It is her affirmation of human will that she is ready to bear the risk of her mother's life but for her, being a chandal is more horrible of these two tragedies. She declares. "Than it will be my return to dream, to return to illusions of Chandal birth. I will never endure that mockery." (163) Prakriti's anguish reflects the turmoil of suppressed energy and the ultimate affirmation of human will against the irrational and inhuman caste practices of society.

In *Chandalika*, Tagore avoids the glorification of traditional male heroes like Lord Buddha and Ananda. The play brings out both the strength and the excruciating inner dilemmas of his protagonist, Prakriti. Tagore makes 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 is a real woman not an idealized one who is at once strong and tormented, confident yet deeply conflicted and divided self-torn between her intense yearning for Ananda and her intense guilt at making him suffer at the mercy of her mother's witchcraft. In narrating the story of an untouchable girl, Tagore wants to hint at the autonomous self development of the woman. In quest of her true self, Prakriti transcends from darkness of social degradation into the light of asserting her own self as a woman she travels through three stages – the innumerable sufferings faced in her material life because of untouchability, her dream relations with Ananda for arousing self respect in her, and the ultimate dignity of her 'self' that she acquires at the end by understanding her true desire.

But it was through Ananda that Prakriti first learns to see herself as a human being in her own right, she becomes aware of her dignity and 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 for the first time in her life. By giving water to the thirsty monk, it is as if Prakriti wants to quench her own thirst for self respect. It is a kind of purifier which purifies her from the self negating stigma of being an outcast. Ananda has given her the power of giving life and nourishment to thirsty travellers. She gains an understanding of her self-hood, an awareness of her identity as a woman, and an acknowledgement of her self-worth. Her self-worth pushes her to the elemental desire of the woman for the man. In her obsession to possess Ananda, Prakriti makes an erroneous choice. She implores her mother, Maya to use magic to drag Ananda to her doors. Maya's magical powers contest with Ananda's Spiritual powers until he is forced against his will to come back to Prakriti. But seeing her desired man in painful agony, Prakriti understands her error in dragging Ananda, her symbol of truth to a baser level where he becomes a mere shadow of his former self. Prakriti realizes that her desire is not for the person that the monk represents but for the affirmation of her own identity as an ideal female self. It is through love that Prakriti transcends her socially imposed caste and ultimately signifies herself as a radical human being.

Though feminine consciousness gives emphasis on the issues of self consciousness, reactions, rebellion, self realization and self assertion, in the periphery of double marginalization faced by Dalit women such as Prakriti, the issues of equality, fulfilment of sensual drives, emotional contentment become weak. They are "subaltern among the subalterns" because their humanity is crushed under the burden of patriarchy as well as under the burden of caste prejudice. In the double marginalization, their identity remains shrouded and it reduced to cipher. As in the case of Prakriti, she watches wistfully from the shadows as the world passes her as even her shadow was auspicious, the sweet meat vendor, the bangle seller and the flower girls all shunned her existence because of untouchability. But her low caste hesitation is brushed aside by the monk who desires her to quench his thirst. His remark, "If the black clouds of Shravana are dubbed Chandal, he said what of it? It does not change their nature, or destroy the virtue

of their water. Don't humiliate yourself, he said: self humiliation is a sin, worse than self murder." (156) Prakriti is thrilled to hear him and freed from her natal inferiority; she is roused to a consciousness of her human dignity. The impetuous heroine is involved in a passion and adoration when Ananda with his fellow monks passes by without looking at her. Prakriti prevails upon her mother to exercise her black art to drag Ananda. But profoundly moved by the sight of the mortification of her idol helplessly struggling on the verge of degradation, Prakriti releases him from the grip of her desires being spiritually awakened. Thus in *Chandalika* Tagore has described the journey of Prakriti from ignorance to knowledge, from subjugation to self assertion in which she becomes a 'new woman', stronger even to Ananda by withdrawing the magical effect, out of sympathy.

Tagore's *Natir Puja (The Dancing Girl's Worship)*, one of his simplest and most moving plays has as its background the religious martyrdom of a woman of humble station and the head-on collision of traditional Hinduism and the newly proclaimed enlightened doctrine of the Buddha forms its foreground.

Having embraced Buddhism, king Bimbisara abdicates his sovereignty in favour of his son. Ajatasatru, who aspires to the throne, professes a reversion to the old faith upheld by Devadatta as a reaction against the new religion preached by Lord Buddha. Srimati, the court dancer, receives the stirring command from Bhikshu Upali to offer worship at the sacred altar on Vasanta Purnima. Furiated at this honour shown to Srimati, a despised dancing girl, Princess Ratnabali, the chief antagonist of the heroine swears to foil her mission. She manoeuvres to obtain royal permission to make Srimati perform a sacrilegious dance before the holy after. On the other side, in an atmosphere of tumultuous public fury, the news reaches that Bikhshun Utpalparna has been killed by Devadatta's followers and king Bimbisara too has been murdered on his way to the sacred altar. Spiritually aroused by the divine command, Srimati appears meretriciously attired to dance and thereby to offer worship. Outwardly a dancer but a devotee within, Srimati dances ecstatically chants the prohibited

Buddhist hymns and throws off all her outer robes and ornaments revealing a Bikhshuni's yellow robe underneath the dancer's. Instigated by Ratnabali, the guards strike Srimati against their will as her dance was a transparent disguise for her worship which was banned by the king. But Lokeswari the queen mother, moved by the sublime spectacle of martyrdom of Srimati leads the hymnal chanting in which everybody joins except Ratnabali. King Ajatsatru also moves by hearing this direful news. When everyone has left the stage, Princess Ratnabali being awakened, kneels down and touches the feet of Srimati in great veneration reciting the Buddhist mantras Srimati died hymning. Thus Srimati with her supreme sacrifice has equalled herself with others who sacrificed for the noble cause of religion.

Srimati's death in Natir Puja is not a tragedy of traditional standard, but a tragedy of martyred devotion. Thomas A Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Saint Joan of Bernard Shaw make deliberate effort to become martyr. But if we compare Srimati's sacrifice with them our conclusion will be 'Srimati is superior because Becket and Joan are people of high rank and Srimati is a court dancer of low status. She becomes a model martyr as her religious sense is superior to those who just pretend to be religious. Srimati's religious martyrdom emphasizes that true faith is the expression of pure spirit which is independent of birth and rank, of man-made hierarchy, the external cloak of human soul.

Like Prakriti, Srimati also crosses her journey from suppression to self assertion. Self consciousness in Srimati plays a vital role in her development. When the mendicant monk asks for alms to her in the name of the Buddha, she hesitates in offering alms which she feels would not be worthy of the monk's alms bowl. But she is stirred to learn that as a blessed servant of the Lord she has been chosen to offer her best to him. She becomes conscious of her own self and her mind set is completely changed after realization of her 'self'. The gradual evolution of Srimati from her initial unpreparedness to her unshakeable faith and ultimate dedication lifts the girl of low stature to a

high status of a martyr. Srimati ecstatically pours out her emotions being reawakened:

Have you come to your door my Lord  
To seek my inmost me?  
Call your call toady within.  
For at your call  
The hidden flowers came out on the naked  
branches  
At your call. (Natirpuja 108)

tation of humanity in *Natirpuja* stresses on the essential equality of human beings. Tagore's humanism has much in common with the Buddha's enlightened concept of man, to be valued only in terms of inner worth and not by the distinctions of birth. Bhikshuni Utpalaparna's firm reminder to expose Ratnabali's caste ridden psychology, "Princess, their cast is one and the same. There is an aristocracy of which you know nothing" stresses the negation of caste hierarchy of Hindu Varna System. Tagore's Srimati is an embodiment of inner strength. Her self-transforming process makes her realize that the true shrine of the Lord exists within. Even though the news reaches her that the worship of Buddha has been banned, Srimati remains unflinching in her determination to offer worship. She has embraced the religion of non violence and her weapon is the weapon of her faith: "I have my weapons already from my Master's hand, my warfare has begun. May violence be brought low, and the Lord have the victory." (108) She performs worship at the cost of her own life paying no care for the royal order. Srimati, the worshipper dancer carries out the commands, one sacred and the other sacrilegious, through the self same act of heroic devotion by offering worship in the form of dance. Srimati's death across the holy seat chanting the hymns of the Buddha brings about her salvation for her death leads to her spiritual fulfilment. As her dance is the means of her worship, so her worship becomes the means of her martyrdom.

Thus the analysis of Tagore's women characters signify that each woman sustains her own autonomy of self and she can survive in those spaces that are beyond the domain of gender specific and caste specific morality. Tagore has described the journey of his women characters from ignorance to knowledge, from

subjugation to celebration. In their journey from subjugated women to 'new women', self consciousness plays a vital role. When Srimati had no self consciousness, she had no courage at all. After listening to the message of equality from Upali and Utpalparna, She becomes conscious of her own self and it is the consciousness of Srimati, which lifts her from a mere dancing girl to the height of a martyr. Likewise, when Prakriti realizes her identity, she becomes strong willed. Her consciousness inculcates in her mind the strength to venture further to gain Ananda. Prakriti becomes stronger even to Ananda by withdrawing the magical effect. Thus the inner quest of underprivileged women for self fulfilment, protest against oppression, sublimity of spirit, distinctive identity, realization of moral commitments, irresistible vehemence and innate courage for the affirmation of self and identity constitutes the canvass of Tagore's distinctive feminist ideology.

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