

Paper

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**The Journeys of *Prakriti* and *Doyamoyee*:
The Portrayal of Female Desire by Tagore and Ray**



The 20th century Bengali woman was restricted in all aspects of society which was, and still is to some extent, entirely controlled by patriarchal notions and structures. Though the Nationalist struggle for Independence and later social movements like in Tebhaga and Telangana saw as many women taking an active part and leading, their roles stood at the intersection of many entities of Indian society. Caste and Class were the foremost of them. These increased the layers of marginalization for women. And these discriminations and control exercised over women were again appropriated through religion, and acts like deification created a screen of hollow respect for them. Religion, rather contorted religion, was and continues to be the strongest tool to suppress free thought, expression of

desire, and the urge to question. From the Vedic age, women have been the easy prey of religious dogmatism, superstitions, and majoritarian bigotry, which stripped them of their identity in society.

Both Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray have been critics of this rigid orthodoxy of religion, in this case, Hinduism. Both of them stood firmly against religious dogmatism. They acknowledged and portrayed woman emancipation and female desire through their works, which, when seen in the context of their times, can be considered as path-breaking. They realized how the intersection of class, caste, and gender restricted the Indian woman from finding liberation and an independent voice of expression.

In this paper, I will try to take the stories of two important female characters, one from Tagore's Chandalika and another from Ray's Devi, and analyse their significance, in line with their expression of desires in the context of the socio-political environment at the time of the creators.

Tagore produced Chandalika in his twilight years. "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 (Chaudhuri, 2010)." Chandalika is a dance drama with three main characters: Prakriti, the lower caste girl, her mother, and Ananda, the Buddhist monk. It is partly based on a Buddhist tale, but Tagore's treatment blends many sections reflecting the dichotomies of Indian society and Hindu religion, which is a topic for another paper.

The story revolves around Prakriti, who is restricted to interactions only within her community. We see the marginalization of Prakriti and thus the Dalit community through interaction with characters like the doiwala (the curd seller) *churiwala* (the bangle seller). When they enter one by one into the scene, the other girls warn them about not selling the goods to Prakriti since she is the daughter of a *Chandal*.

"Don't touch her, she is the daughter of a chandalini.

Your curd will rot otherwise."

The first part of the dance-drama presents us with this instance, which sharply exposes the cruelties of the caste system, prevalent from the Vedic times. Prakriti talks about the futility of life, the hopelessness of existence for people like her who do not find a place in society. For her, the marginalization happens both on the lines of caste and gender. It is a restricted space, sketched by society, for her to wander.

She experiences liberation for the first time when Ananda, the Buddhist monk, agrees to accept water from her. Her shock and awkwardness are quite evident from the answer that follows:

"Forgive me, O Lord!

I am the daughter of a chandal

The water in my well is impure.

I do not bear the good fortune of quenching your thirst".

ক্ষমা করো প্রভু, ক্ষমা করো মোরে—

আমি চণ্ডালের কন্যা,

মোর কূপের বারি অশুচি ।

তোমারে দেব জল হেন পুণ্যের আমি

নহি অধিকারিণী,

আমি চণ্ডালের কন্যা ॥

But the answer from Ananda comes as a revelation to Prakriti and the readers of that time. The monk completely disapproves of the idea of untouchability, and for the first time, Prakriti gets the respect deserved for being a human being. Ananda accepts water from her, which is the turning point Tagore provides us, which drives the drama forward.

Chandalika accommodates many intersections of many elements like caste, gender, sexual morality, and spiritual emancipation. But in this paper, the analysis will aim to sketch only the gender perspective and expression of female desire. "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 how she perceives the world and how 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 (Chaudhuri, 2010, pg. 553)."

Whereas Tagore tries to understand the complexities of Indian society and criticizes caste, and provides spiritual emancipation, Ray attempts to do it through the issue of deification of women. But both the works act as staunch critiques of the parochial religious orders.

Devi: The Goddess talks about the journey of Dayamoyee, from a 17-year-old homemaker to the incarnation of Goddess Kali. Kalikinkar Roy, a landlord in 20th century Bengal, is a religious man who, one day, gets a divine message from the Mother Goddess about Dayamoyee being an incarnation of Kali.

As opined by Normal Holland in an essay published in the book *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism, and Culture*,

“Faith creates one reality and destroys another. We can no more live without faith than we could survive without a mother—even if she is a destroyer and a creator. Our every act, our every perception, builds on hypotheses about the world, a basic trust in its constancy, in its materiality, in our ability to know it, in short, faith.” In a society where religious leaders find more resonance than activists, this idea of faith is exactly what the character of Kalikinkar feeds upon. It destroys the existing reality of Doyamoyee, stripping her of the surroundings that she was starting to build in this new home, around new people. The revelation through dream quite naturally does not get questioned in the household because Kalicharan is the patriarch, and soon, we see Dayamoyee festooned with a Hibiscus garland, which is usually used to worship Goddess Kali.

Dayamoyee becomes a representation of not only women but society in general when she refuses to flee with her husband, Umapasrad because she fears some adversity. By then, the idea of her being a goddess was grilled inside her head, to an extent where her unconscious mind started believing the same. This unchallenged hierarchical and biased structure created by religion feeds from this fear to shut every remaining door of evolution.

Prakriti in Tagore’s *Chandalika* is a Dalit girl trying to comply with the gender and caste norms of her society. She has no room for expression of any sort of desire whatsoever. On the other hand, Doya comes from an upper caste, upper-class family. But they meet at a common juncture: the expression or suppression of desire. Tagore and Ray take up very different approaches in dealing with the subject. Still, the important factor becomes the acknowledgment of female sexuality that happens through the dance drama and the film, to finally challenge and criticize religious dogmatism.

“Sociological understandings of sex and gender miss the crucial point that these constructs may be the effect of regulating, normative mechanisms of power (Puri, 1999, pg. 5).” This finds resonance in both *Chandalika* and *Devi*. We do not experience the control exercised on both these protagonists as isolated from the power conflict within the society.

The two characters of Prakriti and Dayamoyee stand in front of each other with different roles. Prakriti is oppressed by religion, and Daya becomes the upholder of the same when she is given the status of an *avatar* (incarnation). One sits at the topmost level, and the other struggles at the bottom of the hierarchy created by religion and patriarchy.

In his address to the staff and students of Shantiniketan and Sriniketan on 20th September 1932, Tagore said:

“From the beginning of human history, there has continued the cleavage between classes, those favoured by circumstances exploiting the weaknesses of others and building the stronghold of their pride of superiority upon the humiliation of a large section of the community. No civilized society can thrive upon victims whose humanity has been permanently mutilated, whose minds have been compelled to dwell in the dark.”

At the core of both the works, the conflict is sensual and spiritual, of the body and the spirit. It points towards the realization of human worth and sensibilities.

Both Prakriti and Dayamoyee come from very different socio-economic backgrounds but are prisoners of these unquestioned structures, which have been built and appropriated for thousands of years by patriarchy. In the case of *Chandalika*, Prakriti is born with the shackles of Vedic rigidity, and in *Devi*, Dayamoyee falls prey to blind faith. The suppression of female desires is clearly a by-product of the religious structures. For Prakriti, her caste identity does not allow her to express or explore her wants and sexual desires from the day she is born. “For Prakriti, the socio-culturally imposed selfhood is that of an untouchable, an outcast; her desire would only be ratified if it is expressed within her caste and class (Chaudhuri, 2010).” But in the case of Dayamoyee, deification, considered a pious process, itself initiates the process of sweeping away the desires of a newlywed 17-year-old under the carpet.

Both Tagore and Ray identified this repression of sexual desire, an act uncommon in 20th century Bengal or even post-Independent India. For them, this repressive tentacle becomes a weapon to harshly criticize religion, an act that did not sit well

with the ruling class and caste. “The film’s release caused a furore. Some people openly voiced their opinion that *Devi* disparaged Hindu religious practices, mocking and undermining the faith that makes up the core of Hinduism. There were protest demonstrations on Kolkata streets, and even demands were made that the movie be barred from public viewing (Basu, 2021).”

We understand the repressive desires in Prakriti, when she tastes liberation and feels human along with a sense of belonging for the first time. Tagore touches on the theme of formation and importance of identity through one simple act of empathy performed by Ananda.

“Ananda’s preaching brings a sea-change in her attitude, and she feels awakened to a new life – a life where she is no Chandal but a human being on par with the world, even with the holy man. She argues with her mother: “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 (Kulkarni, 2011, pg. 2)”. For Prakriti, this sense of liberation also opens the window for expressing sexual desires freely for someone not belonging to her community. Until she met with Ananda, religion controlled her expressions of any form and directed them towards a closed community. But this newfound vitality provides her confidence to reply to her mother, “a religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags”.

Again, in *Devi*, Ray tries to highlight desire not through liberation but subjugation. Dayamoyee, 17 years old, was just three years into her marriage when this catastrophic change in her life came knocking. Umamprasad was already away in Calcutta pursuing his studies. Ray shows scenes where Dayamoyee dreams about her husband their marriage. But at the same time, she realizes that her social position being forced upon her will not allow any sort of physical intimacy with her husband. The same realization hits *Umamprasad* when he returns after receiving the news about this strange development. He slips into Dayamoyee’s room one night, and we encounter an intimate scene between the two in a long shot.

Tagore and Ray’s ways of portraying female desire are clearly very different, but the culmination of the outcomes hints towards the hypocrisy and dichotomy that continues to plague Indian society. It points towards the fact “that what destroys Dayamoyee and wrecks her young husband’s life is not a mere man’s whim, nor even the mulishness of a crazy zealot, but something much bigger, mightier, with a sinister life of its own. Something that is so obsessively inward-looking that it loves nothing more than its own shadowed cloisters: Faith – unreasoned and insular, unfailingly self-righteous, if not always sanctimonious (Basu, 2021).”

The comparison of both the works gives us an interesting movement: the movement towards becoming “human” and realizing the enormity of the same. In *Chandalika*, we see Prakriti’s joy after being freed from the clutches of the caste system. The liberation that comes from realizing the essence of man’s religion makes her disregard everything that tied her down. Again, in *Devi*, the destination is the same, but the path is quite different. Dayamoyee falls prey to her father-in-law’s “faith” and is stripped of human qualities at the young age of 17. After Umamprasad returns, it becomes a conversation to convince and remind her of the human desires and wants which are justified to possess.

It is obviously a vast topic that demands constant analysis. But one thing that cannot be denied is the paths these two works pave both in Indian literature and cinema. Tagore, throughout his lifetime, produced diverse works, dealt with issues, both spiritual and social. His characters highlight the times but also make the journey towards modernity. Similarly, Ray’s characters reflected dynamism on screen. His ways of dealing with issues were subtle yet hard-hitting. Films like *Mahanagar*, *Ganashatru*, *Jalsaghar*, *Charulata*, and *Agantuk* deal with gender, feudalism, unemployment, and civilization and expose the bigotry and conflict in our society. In the present socio-political situation that we find ourselves in today, it has become necessary to revisit these works, delve more profound, and most importantly, imbibe the messages within ourselves.

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