

A Comparative Study of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore's Representation of Dalit Women through Their Selected Texts

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Abstract

Dalits in India live at the margin of Indian society which is both patriarchal and caste-biased. Dalits are socially oppressed, economically deprived and culturally castigated. The upper caste people imposed upon the Dalits the stigma of untouchability in order to produce and reproduce the production of labours from the ancient time by corroborating different Hindu texts and scriptures. In this patriarchal society, Dalit women are the most oppressed, because they are not only economically and sexually exploited by the upper-caste people but also by the men of their own castes, even by the male members of their own family.

In the colonial period, with the advent of western education some great scholars and social reformers of Bengal like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took an initiative in creative writing of Bengali literature imbued by the spirit of Renaissance and Nationalism. Renaissance which is intellectual, social, cultural and artistic movement in Bengal started with Raja Rammohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and other intelligentsia in the later half of nineteenth century and ends with Rabindranath Tagore in the first half of twentieth century. This paper will seek how Dalit women are represented in the novels of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay like *Indira*, *Durgesh Nandini*, *Devi Chaudharani* and so on, and Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama *Chandalika* and short story "Shasti" ("Punishment"), and point out their attitudes to Dalit women portrayed in that representation, though both Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath belonged to the same period of Bengal renaissance.

Keywords: Dalit women, representation, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal renaissance.

The etymological meaning of the word “Dalit” is “broken to pieces”, “trampled down”, “crushed” or “suppressed”. “Dalit means ‘grounded down’, or ‘broken to pieces’ in both Marathi and Hindi” (Rao 11). “Dalit” refers to the lower caste people who bears the stigma of untouchability imposed upon them by the upper-caste people in order to reproduce the production of labour but that reproduction of labour is not fixed by the minimum wage but by birth or their forefather’s caste. The labour is reproduced only to serve the upper-caste people and it is produced by the Ideological State Apparatuses¹ by the privileged class (here upper-caste) from the ancient time in Indian society. So, the Dalit live on the margins of Indian society and they are economically deprived, socially ex-communicated and culturally castigated². Among the Dalit, Dalit women are the most exploited. They are oppressed not only by the upper-caste men and women but also by the men of their own caste and often by the men of their own family. In the research article “Dalit Women, life-narratives and literature as experience”, Cielo Griselda Festino writes:

¹ According to a famous French Marxist Louis Althusser , the state has no meaning except as a function of State Power (Repressive State Apparatus or RSA) but a state functions both by its Repressive State Apparatus such as the government, the police, the Army, the Courts, the Prisons etc. and by its Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the Religious ISA, the Educational ISA, the Family ISA, the Legal ISA, the Cultural ISA, the Communications ISA and so on.

Three main differences between RSA and ISAs are:

There is one RSA but there is a plurality in ISAs; RSA belongs to public domain while ISAs belong to private domain and RSA functions primarily by violence and secondarily by ideology while ISAs function mainly by ideology and occasionally by Violence.

² Source: Debabrata Karmakar’s article mentioned in the works cited of that paper, Page 69.

Traditionally, Dalit women have been excluded and subjugated by the men and women of the higher castes as well as the men of their own caste and their own family. Their vulnerability is due to sexual oppression, economic exploitation and social discrimination... (29)

A literary example of the multiple oppressions of a Dalit woman can be taken from Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, in which Bakha's sister Sohini is sexually exploited by a Brahmana priest and abused not only by a washerwoman's wife Gulabo (an upper-caste woman in comparison with sweeper caste) but also by her father.

Before going for an in-depth discussion on the representation of Dalit woman in the selected works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), an analysis of the word "representation" is needed. The word "representation" has been interpreted by various philosophers and academics in different ages in diverse ways. Plato defined literature as "a representation of life" (Mitchell 14) and therefore it creates illusion. Plato also counseled his disciples to control and monitor this representation, for this illusory representation of life might foster anti-social emotions. Plato's great disciple Aristotle considered "representation" as a necessary ingredient for human learning because Mimesis³ is natural to man. In three ways, Aristotle analyzed "representation":

Aristotle says that representation differs from one another in three ways: in object, manner and means. The "object" is that which is represented; the "manner" is the way in which it is represented; the means is the material that is used. (Mitchell 13)

According to a cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, "Representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language" (16). He also said that "to represent

³In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation of human action. By "imitation" he means something like "representation", in its root sense : the poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and re-presenting it in a new "medium" or material—that of words.(Abrams 123)

also means to symbolize” and “to represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination” (16). However, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her epoch-making essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” claims that there are two kinds of representation: “...representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘representation’, as in art and philosophy”(28). Sometimes sculpture, painting, statue and even body as non-language representations play an important role in art and literature. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” shows how a widow Bhubaneswari Bhaduri turned her menstruating body “into a text of woman/ writing” that negated the prevalent notion that women commit suicide because of some illicit love/sexual relationship that leads to pregnancy (Spivak 35).

However, in this paper, a comparative study between Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore’s representation of Dalit women has been made through some selected texts, for both were the pioneer leaders of Bengal renaissance. Renaissance in Bengal was an artistic, literary, cultural movement that is generally regarded to start with Raja Rammohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and other intelligentsia in the latter half of the nineteenth century and concluded with Rabindranath Tagore in the first half of the twentieth century. A comparative study has been made, because both of them are considered stalwarts in Bengali literature and both of them are imbued by the spirit of renaissance and nationalism in the colonial period in Bengal.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, considered as the father of the modern Bengali novel, was born in a respectable Brahmana family settled in Kanthalpara which was located near Naihati in 1838. As a representative of educated upper-caste and upper-middle class of Bengal ("Bhadralok" class), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay represented Dalit women as he saw them from the higher strata of a caste-ridden society. Being born and brought up in an elite society, he saw many Dalit women employed as maid-servants in his periphery. Consequently, Dalit

women represented in his novels are mainly maid-servants who are often addressed by the narrator himself or his mouthpieces as "magi" (slang use of the word "woman" or "girl" in Bengali), which is quite unexpected from such a stalwart in Bengali literature: "Ponds' water has become dark because of the wading of "*Jale-magi* (fisherwomen)" (My translation from *Devi Chaudhirani* 798); or, "Suhasini: yet, according to the tradition of Kolkata there is a cook. That "magi" (cook) will go home" (Translation mine from *Indira* 326). The narrator, too, in the very beginning of the novel *Indira* (1873), addressed a maid-servant coming to take Indira to her in-laws' house from her father's house as "Dasi-magi" (317). Bankim Chandra's addressing Dalit maid-servants, sometimes by himself as a narrator and often by the chief protagonists of his novels in slang language clearly reveals despicable and cynical attitude of the upper-castes to the Dalit women in the contemporary era. Being shaped by the upper-caste culture, he probably could not represent Dalit women in a favourable light. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay also denied the identity of Dalit maid-servants by representing them unnamed or naming them in a disrespectful manner. As for example, in *Durgesh Nandini* (1856), Bankim Chandra did not name his maid-servants; they are called as "Dasi" or "maid-servant" by the chief protagonists of the novel: "Ayesha cautioned the maid-servants (*Dasi*) and went to mother's room." (Translation mine from *Durgesh Nandini* 67) 'After saying that, Ayesha exits alone without waiting for the arrival of the beautiful "Dasi"' (Translation mine from *Durgesh Nandini* 99). The maidservants are humorously named as Bami, Khaepi, Gopal's mother, Nepal's mother and so on in his different novels. The very attitude of the upper-castes often created the problem of identity crisis among the Dalit women in this patriarchal caste-biased society.

Bankim Chandra as a representative of upper-caste people never imagined that a beautiful girl can take birth in a lower caste's house; and if it happens, it should be considered as an exception or miracle: "Karta: "Such one or two beautiful girls may take birth in a Bagdi's

house. But I'll drive her away..." (Translation mine from *Devi Chaudharani* 773). Bagdi and other Dalit women are represented as black, fat and ugly. As for example, Subhasini's maid-servant is described as fat, black and above forty. In *Bishbikha*, a black fat maid-servant is portrayed humorously when she is engaged in cutting fish.

In the novel *Durgesh Nandini*, Biranda Singha, an upper-caste king, refused to marry Bimala because Bimala's mother was a Shudra woman (Dalit woman in modern context). Although he was determined at first not to marry a Dalit girl –even if he would face dire consequence like life imprisonment or death sentence, at last married Bimala unwillingly but did not give her the status of his wife. Bimala was kept as a maid-servant. Bimala's representation in this novel as an intelligent and beautiful woman is made possible only for her father, Aviram Swami's Brahmanic identity; otherwise Bimala would be represented as a dark, ugly and dull Dalit woman if she were born of Shudra or Dalit parents. Bankim Chandra, in fact, presumes that a beautiful woman can only take birth in an upper-caste affluent family; not in a lower-caste poor family. His presumption is quite evident in the conversation between a Brahmana woman and Indira in his celebrated novel *Indira*:

The traveler [a woman] asked, "What is your caste?"

I [Indira] replied, "I am a Kayastha." She said, "I am a Brahmana. Come with me. Though you wear a coarse, dirty saree, you are [seem to be a woman] a girl of affluent family. In a lower-caste poor family, such beauty is not born."

(Translation mine 321)

In *Devi Chaudharani* "Bagdi" caste is represented as the lower-strata symbol and was often used by the upper-caste people of the contemporary society to abuse a person to indicate his ignoble upbringing:

Karta Mahasoi (Master of the house, in the novel, hero Brojeshwar's father) said: "Such audacity! That Bagdi girl (heroine Profulla) enters our house. Get out her immediately by striking her with brooms." (Translation mine 769)

Though Profulla was not a Bagdi, she replied by accepting her imposed lower-caste identity only to stay in her in-law's house: "Whether I am "Bagdi" or "Muchi" [cobbler]—I am his [Karta Mahasoi's] daughter-in law. Doesn't he consider how his daughter-in -law survives?" (My translation 771).

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novels portray that upper-caste people of that time consider the lower caste poor workers immoral and dishonest: "Lady [Suhasini's mother-in-law]: ... Yet those who are low-born, labourers are good?" (My translation from *Indira* 328). In Bankim Chandra's *Bishbikha (Poisoned Tree)* 1873), Nagendra and his father did not employ lower-caste maid servants as they thought the lower castes are dishonest and immoral. Bankim Chandra in his epoch-making novel *Ananda Math* represented Bagdi and Dom as greedy plunderers who looted rice, ghee, maida, chicken, and other things from the carts of English soldiers. Moral laxity among the lower-caste woman is also indicated by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novels. As for example, in *Devi Chaudharani*, Phulmani Napitni's (barber) moral laxity is described in the following way: "On one hand she is a woman of lower caste, on the other hand she had become widow in the tender age; thus she cannot keep her character pure" (Translation Mine 778).

A critical question can be raised regarding Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's representation of Dalit women—Does that representation reveal Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's own discriminatory and derogatory view about Dalit women or is it an attempt made by Bankim Chandra to expose the caste politics of the upper-caste people? A careful study of the above-mentioned texts reveals that as a novelist he never tries to expose the caste-politics of the upper-caste people. He never condemns the caste-bias of the upper-

caste people or oppression of Dalit women based on their caste-identity. He represented them as an upper-caste man saw them. He could not liberate his mind from the upper-caste hegemony, even under the light of Bengal Renaissance. It should be remembered that not only the main characters of the above-mentioned texts, but the narrator of the texts who is often the novelist himself makes some derogatory remarks about Dalit women or represent them in a humorous way, which are often irrelevant and avoidable in the context of the texts.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), on the other hand, as a great litterateur and humanist perceived the evils of untouchability in Indian society and decided to support Mahatma Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign in a unique way. He realized a Dalit woman was exploited mercilessly in a patriarchal caste-ridden society. He wanted to raise questions through a Dalit girl against the accepted status-quo of the contemporary society and thus made a young Dalit girl, a Chandalika the heroine in his dance-drama *Chandalika* (1933):

...By addressing the theme of untouchability through this dance drama Tagore was making an extreme bold socio-political statement against the discrimination of untouchables that in a way supported Mahatma Gandhi's pro Harijan campaign in the late 1930s India... (Chaudhury 553)

The plot of Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* (1933⁴), a dance drama, is based on a Buddhist legend *Divyāyadāna* (616) in which "Prakriti, a Chandal girl, is freed from her previously accumulated sins, which had bought about her low birth (*pūrva sāncita pāpam durgata*) (Y. Krishnan 81)" which clearly reveals that Buddhists considered untouchability "as the product of a man's past *karmas* [deeds] and not an accident of birth..." (Krishnan 81). The Buddhist legend is centered on the story of self-control of a great disciple of Buddha, Ananda and lust of a young Dalit girl, Prakriti. Ananda after covering a long journey on foot became thirsty and drank water from Prakriti—a Chandalika, in spite of knowing her true identity, for

⁴*Chandalika* first published in Bengali in 1933 and in English translation by K. R. Kriplani in 1938.

Ananda as a true Buddhist knew what Buddha proclaimed in the *Vasala Sutta* (*Suttanipāta* I 7. 21 of the *Khuddākanikāya*):

Najaccā vasalohoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇa,
kammuno [also kammana] vasalohoti kammuno hoti brāhmaṇa.⁵

As the young monk Ananda aroused her consciousness and ignited her self-dignity, Prakiti fell in love with Ananda. Despite her mother's cautions, Prakiti requested her mother Maya who knew black magic, to cast a spell on the young monk in order to draw Ananda to their house. Maya perceived agony of Prakiti and cast a spell of powerful black magic on Ananda. Rabindranath Tagore followed the same story line of the Buddhist legend in the first act but he raised some questions towards society and religion through his heroine Prakiti, a Chandalika. When Maya doubted her daughter might hide her caste identity from Ananda, Prakiti asserted:

Prakiti. I told him, yes. He said it wasn't true. If the black clouds of Sravana are dubbed Chandal, he said, what of it? It doesn't 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. (138)

Through his advocate Ananda, Tagore wanted to raise Dalit consciousness and prompted the Dalits like Prakiti to lead a dignified human life by annihilating self-humiliation. He probably endeavoured to destroy the Brahmanic hegemony that worked as an Ideological State Apparatus⁶ of Religion in Indian society by juxtaposing Buddhist philosophy through his

⁵ "Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become brāhmaṇa; by deeds or karma one becomes an outcaste, by karma alone one becomes a brāhman". For details see Y. Krishnan's research paper "Buddhism and the caste System", Page 79.

⁶ According to a famous French Marxist Louis Althusser, the state has no meaning except as a function of State Power (Repressive State Apparatus or RSA) but a state functions both by its Repressive State Apparatus such as the government, the police, the Army, the Courts, the Prisons etc. and by its Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the Religious ISA, the Educational ISA, the Family ISA, the Legal ISA, the Cultural ISA, the Communications ISA and so on

mouthpiece Annanda, “As I [Ananda] a human being, so also are you [Prakriti], and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirst” (Act I 138). Rabindranath Tagore, through this dance drama appealed to the educated people to erode the curse of untouchables from Indian society by citing Hindu mythology: “He [Ananda] said that Janaki bathed in such water as this, at the beginning of her forest exile, and that Guhak, the Chandal, drew it for her...” (Act I 139). His opinion about religion that stresses on individual respect is also reflected through his heroine Prakriti, “...I respect him who respects me. A religion that insults is a false religion...” (Act I 143).

Following the plot of the Buddhist legend, the second act of the drama depicted the influence of Black magic on Ananda who comes to the Chandalika’s house at night but unlike the Buddhist legend, it ends with a twist. In the Buddhist legend, Chandalika spread the couch for Ananda in her house. Ananda after getting back his consciousness, prayed to Buddha, his master to save him. Lord Buddha broke the magic spell after hearing his prayer. Ananda went back pure and chaste, but in Tagore’s *Chandalika* it was not Ananda but Prakriti who realized her mistake and asked Ananda remorsefully: “I have dragged you down to earth, how else could you raise me to heaven?” (Act II 154). But Prakriti’s mother, Maya, had to sacrifice her life for the sin her daughter had committed. She died in order to purify her daughter from her passionate love for a young monk. The sudden disillusionment of Prakriti also destroys the upper-caste’s perceptions and prejudices against Dalit women as sensual ones, devoid of morality and spirituality. Ultimately the drama ends with the chanting of Ananda:

Buddho susudho karuna mahannavo

Yoccanta suddhabbara-gnana locano

Lokassa papupakilesa ghatako

*Vandami Buddham ahamadarena tam.*⁷ (Act II 154)

This introduction of Ananda's chanting purifies and heightens a Dalit girl from the sin of lust and passionate love for her lover, a young Buddhist monk. Consequently, the plot of the drama has been transformed by Tagore "into a psychological drama of intense spiritual conflict" (Introduction to *Chandalika* 133) and the heroine has also been transformed from a lustful girl into a very sensitive one:

It is not the story of a wicked girl roused to lust by the physical beauty of the monk, but of a very sensitive girl, condemned by her birth to a despised caste, who is suddenly awakened to a consciousness of her full rights as a woman by the humanity of a follower of the Buddha, who accepts water from his hand and touches her to judge herself, not by the artificial values that society attaches to the accidents of birth, but by her capacity for love and service. (Introduction to *Chandalika*, K. K. Kriplani 133)

Rabindranath Tagore in his short story "Shasti" ("Punishment") has portrayed the dire consequence of a young Dalit woman, Chandara who was sentenced to death because of the false charge of murder of her sister-in law (the wife of her husband's elder brother) imposed upon her by her husband, Chidam in order to save the real murderer (her husband's elder brother). Though this story can be analyzed from a psychological point of view that Chandara's husband imposed the charge of murder on his wife because of his jealous love, but from the social point of view this story can be taken as a fine example of oppression of Dalit women. Chidam and his elder brother Dukhiram being Dalits are economically deprived; consequently they could not earn their food despite a whole day's labour. Chidam and Dukhiram often beat or abused their wives when their wives quarreled bitterly because of their extreme poverty. On

⁷ To the most pure Buddha, mighty ocean of mercy, / Seer of knowledge absolute, pure, supreme, / Of the world's sin and suffering the Destroyer – / Solemnly to the Buddha I bow in homage.

a gloomy evening, when the two brothers came back from their work and Dukhiram wanted rice, his wife Radha retorted harshly. Dukhiram hit on Radha's head with an axe in sudden anger and utter frustration and she died immediately. Chidam put the blame of murder on his wife in order to save his brother from capital punishment and Chandara remained silent as a silent protest against the oppression of a patriarchal society.

Regarding the representation of Dalit women in the works of the two great writers of Bengali literature, it can be concluded that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's representation of Dalit women is tainted by the colour of orthodox Hinduism practiced by the upper-caste people of his time. He cannot represent them without biasness or in the light of Renaissance under the impact of Western education. He represented them as he or his readers (mostly upper-caste because educated lower-caste were rare at that time) saw them and he represented the culture by which he was shaped. However, he was not devoid of the sympathy of the lower-caste labourers when Indira was ashamed of her when for a moment she felt disgusted with the palanquin bearers who carried her palanquin only to earn their livelihood (318). Like an educated young man, he also dreamt of a casteless Hindu society in *Ananda Math* where every son of Mother India is equal to her. Despite his sympathy for the Dalit, it can be said that he unwittingly represented Dalit women in his novels in an unfavourable light or in a humorous way shaped by his upper-caste culture. On the other hand, Rabindranath Tagore through his heroine Chandalika/ Prakriti questioned the relevance of caste-biased Hindu society in contemporary era, and like a true realist represented Dalit women as he saw them. Like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay he also used the slang "Magi" to identify the Dalit women in his short story "Shasti" and represented Dalit characters as impulsive ones in this short story, but he never represented them in an unfavourable light according to the taste and culture of the upper-caste writers. Like a true artist he ended the drama *Chandalika* with Maya's death as an act of penance which was absent in the Buddhist legend. From Dalit perspective, Maya's death may

be interpreted as a dire consequence of a Dalit girl's love for an upper-caste preacher. This death also symbolizes the reality of a caste-based society –the death of a Dalit for her daughter's passionate love for a young monk.

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