

## **Social Harmony and Integrity: An Advocacy of Universal Humanism in Rabindranath Tagore's "Chandalika"**

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### **Abstract**

*The world is replete with racial, regional, lingual, religious and cultural diversities. The terms racism, religiosity, caste divisions etc. are the social constructs rather than natural, by birth phenomena. This study examines Rabindranath Tagore's Two act play – "Chandalika" focusing social harmony and solidarity as an integral aspect of universal humanism. Conceptualizing the theoretical frameworks of humanism that elevates human dignity and fraternity, this research attempts to display how the writer advocates the universal humanism through the social harmony and integrity in the play. Caste discrimination is still prevalent in Hindu culture, and racial, cultural and regional prejudices have had a long history in different the parts of the world. The conflict amid different castes, religions, regions and races has soared up in some parts of the world dismantling social harmony. When a human being regards and respects another human being regardless of diverse castes, races, religions, and cultural and regional disparities, it echoes the sense of universal humanism . This research explores Tagore's ideals of social, religious and racial harmony as a part of universal humanism enshrined in the Text. It answers the question: how does the play Chadalika advocate the aesthetics of social harmony as a part of universal humanism? The prejudices and discriminations in the name of caste, races, regions and religions have wrought the world since long. Tagore appeals for the end of such prejudices through his play, thereby cherishing and nourishing universal humanism.*

**Key words :** diversities, prejudices, universal humanism, caste, race, social harmony, Advocate, disparities, the conflict etc.

### **Social Harmony : An Essence of Universal humanism**

The people of the world are vertically divided in the guise of their diverse cultures, regions, religions, languages, castes, races, ethnic classes and so on. In the name of differences, people resort to wars and conflicts embracing prejudices, hatred, hostility and inhumanity towards others. The study of Cong Lin shows:

People are divided by several factitious categories and partitions, such as identity politics, around the world where all cultural groups feel their members are to some extent being attacked, bullied, persecuted, and discriminated against. Whether people admit it or not, and whether government hide it or not, it is a fact that people are full of diversity in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, language, abilities and disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, needs, nationality, political ideology, citizenship status, family composition, cultural background, income, occupation, etc (1)

There exists the crisis of humanity among the people on the dearth of love , co-operation and universal fraternity. The different parts of the world are still suffocating from social disharmony, enmity, disorder, violence, and even bloodshed tramping human norms and values . But the effect of globalization has converted the entire world into a small village, and a small family. In this regard,

one human being needs to honor another human being on the spirit of co-existence, fraternity and universal humanism. As a philosophical idea, humanism emphasizes the glory and the dignity of human beings appealing for the humanity. Tone Svetelj writes, “Cicero deepens humanitas with a new spiritual dimension: humanitas is something that man acquires as a result of his education, which then challenges him to raise himself beyond human crudeness toward a higher level of existence. Man’s humanness is based on his education and spiritual position, rather than his social status or background” (27).

Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively. According to humanism, man exists at the center of the universe and is the measure of everything in the universe. The striking characteristic of humanism in the ancient Greek context is the relevance of human reason and human ability of thinking. The another feature of humanism is the belief in the human progress and development of the human nature. Hence, humanism imparts moral and spiritual education, human magnanimity, dignity and respect, wit, gracefulness, sensitivity, inner evenness, mildness, kindness, and generosity. In the context of twenty first century , humanism tailors unity and universality with ethical thinking:

In agreement with Protagoras, universal humanism retains man as the center and measure of everything, not in the sense of modern subjectivism and individualism, but as a new awareness of the essence of being human in the context of globalization. This humanism promulgates a new world order and ethical thinking, striving for unity and equality of humans on the global level. It also requires a new upbringing and mind-transformation, allowing us to accept the other in his/her humanness with his/her uniqueness, originality, diversity, dignity, strangeness, and mysteriousness. In one word, this humanism is universal in the sense of the Greek *kaqolou*, comprising both universality (universal, general, altogether) as well as wholeness (entire, at all, whole, all inclusive (“Envisioning a new.....” 28)

I think that humanism is an aspiration to peace, democracy, justice and human rights. It is an aspiration to tolerance, knowledge and the diversity of cultures. It is rooted in ethics and in social and economic responsibility. Humanism is central to our commitment to take up major common challenges, including respect for the environment, respect for fundamental rights, for the dignity of every individual and for diversity. Thus, humanity is mutually supportive and responsible . We know that culture, art, science, education, communication and knowledge are the true values upon which the essence of humanity rests.

### **Pathos of Universal Humanism**

Rabindranath Tagore as an author of innumerable stories, poems and plays imparts the essence of universal humanism through his creative works. His play “Chandalika” embracing the Buddhist legend inculcates the message of social harmony among different castes. One hot day, a Buddhist disciple Ananda happens to stop near a girl named Prakriti belonging to the lower caste for some water. Being overwhelmed by his presence as a fellow human being, she gives him water without caring her caste and class. Later, she informs her mother about her holy job:

Prakriti: ‘Give me water’. He set the words echoing in my heart.

Mother: Heaven defend us! He said to you ‘Give me water.’ ? Who was it ?  
Someone of our own caste ?

Prakriti: That is what he said- that he belonged to our kind.

Mother: You didn't hide your caste? Did you tell him that you are Chandalini ?

Prakriti: 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. (71)

Prakriti echoes the essence of social harmony enshrined in Ananda's teachings to persuade her mother. When she hesitates to give him water, he convinces her not to humiliate herself in the name of caste as it is a sin worse than self-murder, "I said, 'I am a chandalini, and the well-water is unclean.' He said, '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'" (71). Mother scolds her for being reckless towards her caste she was born in and even threatens that she will have to pay price for her madness. Since she was born a slave, she has committed a sin according to her. She reprimands Prakriti for committing a sin. But Prakriti defends her with a voice of humanity, "Prakriti: 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"(73).

The conflict between Prakriti and her mother mounts higher and reaches its climax point on the issues of their caste. Mother holds the traditional beliefs of caste discrimination prevalent in Hindu society. She defends caste segregation and discrimination. It is caste system which has deluded human beings in Hindu societies rendering people backward and irrational. Ravidas writes against caste system: "All people are involved in the cycle of caste system. This disease of caste system is harmful for the human society. This sin of caste system, one day, will eat up the whole humanity" (Shalok-121). Conversely, Prakriti representing modern norms and values respects the religion of universal humanity and magnanimity. Her voices echo the sense of stern solidarity and unity among the people of different castes. She responds to her mother's irrationality and narrow-mindedness :

Mother: Have you no respect for religion ?

Prakriti: How can I say? 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. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer. I am afraid of nothing now. Chant your spells, bring the Bhikshu to the side of the Chandalini. I myself shall do him honour- no one else can honour him so well (75)

Prakriti respects Ananda's religion from the inner core of her heart. Either being fascinated with his presence or his heart touching words, she favors him as a true and rational human being. Therefore, she implores her mother to bring him back before her through her magic spells. She holds that a true religion of human being is not to discriminate human beings on the ground of caste system. Kabir as a staunch opponent of caste, class and untouchability, denounces the whole apparatus of Hindu and Muslim piety as the great hurdles since they uphold caste system. Kabir disdains caste system in a verse :

Hidden or visible is but one milk

Whom to call a Brahm in or Shudra then?

Let none go astray in the false pride,  
Both Hindus and Turks are the false creed.  
Skin, bone, excretion; all is the similar.  
The world is created from the drop similar,  
Who is then Brahmin, who is Shudra? (Bijak, Ramaini-26/7-8)

The First female revolutionary of Nepal Yogmaya Neupane attempts to unite all the people of diverse castes and communities into one through her sacred verses. She believes in unity in diversity – whatever castes and races exist in society. She, therefore, intends to chuck out caste system into the hearth [burning oven] and get it ruined forever. Neupane’s verses advocate nothing less than shrugging off one’s Brahmin caste, which implies doing away with all castes:

यसै बात्का अर्थ नलाई धरता पाएनौ ।                      You venture to decipher what I mean  
पैसा धेरै पायौ भने बेरता लाएनौ ॥                      But may do whatever you like for money  
धर्म थाम्ने इन्साफीले यति चाल पाउनु ।                      The right person may know well  
कन् कन् जातले जन् जन् ल्याउछ जातमा मिलाउन ॥                      Let one caste be united into another.

(योगवानी, १३)

(My trans.)

Neupane’s protest against caste discrimination is embedded with her *nirguna bhakti*. She disfavors caste systems of Hinduism. Neupane intends to transform the existing status quo of her contemporary society. Her verses too echo the sense of social harmony and fraternity representing Tagore’s universal humanism as a true religion enshrined in the play. She urges people of different castes to unite themselves through inter caste matrimonial behaviors. With the rise of globalization in the world, mutual respect to each human being irrespective of their socially constructed variations should be guided and emulated. Masnur Alamn asserts, “In the spirit of mutual and beneficial cooperation, regardless of differences of religions, culture, ethnicity and languages, they can develop the country, make achievement in the era of globalization. This is a typical local wisdom that deserves to be imitated, emulated and guided” (268).

As a true human being, we should make an endeavor to build a harmonious life recognizing the diversity of religion, caste and culture, and appreciating each other’s differences gracefully. Prejudices towards each other’s differences beget discriminations, and discriminations beget disharmony and conflict rendering social harmony at stake. Tagore too launches his crusade against such prejudices through his literary texts as in the play.

Prakriti insists on bringing Ananda back but her mother warns her that it brings a curse for her. Prakriti replies, “ No course, it brings no curse, it brings the gift of my new birth”(81). Upon the request of Prakriti, her mother chants her spells and makes Ananda, the disciple of Buddha, appear before them. Ananda suddenly appears before them. Prakriti being overwhelmed with his enchanting divine status realizes her victory, “ The veil of my illusion shall fall upon them and wipe away the dust. Victory, victory to thee, O Lord !” (81). This is the victory of humanity and solidarity. She surrenders to Ananda’s ideals of equality and fraternity. Her mother also realizes the value of social solidarity and ultimately pleads for forgiveness with Ananda, “ Victory to thee, O Lord, My sins and my life lie together at thy feet, and my days end here, in the haven of thy forgiveness” (81). Then, Ananda chants the hymns of Buddha’s ideals of absolute knowledge advocating the universal humanism :

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. (81)

The towering conflict between Prakriti and her mother gets resolved when Ananda as a messenger of the Buddha appears before them suddenly. The conflict between them gets over when her mother deciphers the real essence of true humanity. Her heart melts and mingles into the hearts of Prakriti and Ananda with the comprehensive vision of self-enlightenment. After the self-realization of knowledge and wisdom, both of them feel that they have got a new life, a new birth with new innovative thoughts of universal humanism and social harmony. Ananda as a Buddhist monk makes Prakriti and her mother, who belong to Hindu sects, realize the true sense of humanity and fraternity. The play exalts the religious integrity as an another underlying essence. The harmony among three characters does not only imply the harmony among ethnicities or races but also religious tolerance and integrity. Masnur Alam asserts:

At present and in the future, we cannot avoid pluralism, both religious and cultural. In religious pluralism, Komarudin Hidayat said the recognition is to provide place for other religions as a truth recognized by its respective followers. Similarly, Nurcholish Madjid stated that recognition of other religions is a form of implicit Muslim faith, even though he still believes that their religion is the best and right, yet at the same time, they have the tolerance and friendship with people of other faiths. So under these conditions, tolerance should be encouraged in order to create peace in the society and the nation. With the creation of peace, it will create harmony in the diversity of religions and cultures.(270)

It is religious, cultural, racial etc. tolerance that flourishes peace, non-violence, order, harmony and solidarity among human beings in society. Only then, social harmony can be maintained with a true spirit of comprehensive vision of humanity and magnanimity. In the end of the play *Chandalika*, two Hindu characters Prakriti and her mother, on the principle of true humanity, unite themselves with Ananda, a Buddhist monk ignoring religious and ethnic/caste variations or differences. All the characters - Ananda, Prakriti and her mother chant, "Victory to thee, O Lord. ...."(81). This victory implies the victory of mutual understanding, and religious and ethnic integrity thereby boosting social harmony. Hence, the play advocates universal humanism as an essential essence of human civilization.

### **Social Integrity**

Social harmony and integrity are the indispensable parts of human civilization. The divisions of human beings on the ground of caste and races, religions and cultures are the major obstacles of social harmony in the world as they impede the true sense of universal humanism. Caste system and religious intolerance do not permit a true spirit but promotes a narrow-mindedness and prejudices. It is anti-social in spirit. Many killings, kidnappings, murders, rapes and all sorts of social unrests are exacerbated by the caste system and religious intolerance. A true religion does not become a missionary religion unless and until it integrates the other social groups into its fold on the basis of equal footing. Tagore highlights the social harmony and religious integrity through his play *Chandalika*. Both Prakriti and her mother gets enlightened at the end of the play and surrender to the teaching of Ananda. The conflict between Prakriti and her mother gets resolved when Ananda as a messenger of God appears before them with the light of knowledge and wisdom.

Along with the caste system, religious hostility is also a great hindrance to social solidarity and to establish a new social order based on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity and the principles of democracy. The play suggests that the institution of society must be based on reason and not on atrocious traditions. No one can build anything on the foundation of caste. One cannot build up a nation and a morality on the ground of caste system and religious biasness. Hence, they should be uprooted from the society so as to establish social harmony and fraternity thereby cherishing universal humanism in the world.

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