

Thinking about the play

1. Why does something so ordinary and commonplace as giving water to a wayfarer become so significant to Prakriti?

Answer. The Buddhist monk, Ananda, is a wanderer in the play and is the most beloved disciple of Buddha. On returning from a visit, he felt thirsty and met Prakriti, a girl belonging to the lowest untouchable caste. All her life, Prakriti has been told that she is a chandala, a low untouchable caste. She faces hatred and is despised by members of the higher caste. She is considered unclean and hence never loved herself. In contrast, the monk made her realise her worth and treated her with respect, making no such distinction between himself and Prakriti and sought water from her. The Buddhist monk's words enlightened her. An ordinary act of giving water to a wayfarer liberated her from the strings of social demands, and hence, it became so significant to Prakriti.

2. Why is the girl named Prakriti in the play? What are the images in the play that relate to this theme?

Answer. Tagore's play 'Chandalika' is focused on the role of Prakriti. 'Prakriti', which means 'nature', represents the character's self-realisation as a woman and rebirth of her identity as a woman. The girl Prakriti is a low-caste untouchable who is influenced by the humanity of Ananda, the Buddhist monk. Prakriti depicts the natural desire of a woman who is awed by human ethics.

3. How does the churning of emotions bring about self-realisation in Prakriti even if at the cost of her mother's life?

Answer. Prakriti, who gave the Buddhist monk water, fell in love with the beautiful monk. Unable to restrain herself, she made her mother, who knew the art of magic, cast her spell on him. The spell proved stronger than Ananda's will, and the spell-bound monk presented himself at their house at night. But, as he saw the girl spread the couch for him, he was overcome with shame and remorse and prayed inwardly to his master to save him. When she observed how she had diminished the monk's purity to such depths, she realised the power of her actions and cried out for her mother to stop and destroy the spell. All the radiance, the purity, and the heavenly glow had disappeared. She understood her mistake and pleaded for clemency at his feet, saying, "the dust has soiled your feet, but they have not been soiled in vain. The veil of my illusion shall fall upon them." The realisation eventually dawned on her about the enormity of her cowardly act, and she had to pay the price in the form of her mother's death.

4. How does the mirror reflect the turmoil experienced by the monk as a result of the working of the spell?

Answer. The spell cast by Prakriti's mother at her command was a mighty one. It showed its effects on the monk, raising turmoil within him. His innate passions were evoked by the spell's effect. As she looks into the mirror to trace the monk's steps to her home through Prakriti's eyes, Tagore provides glimpses of the disruption to the readers. At the start of the play, the readers are provided with a glimpse of the monk's turmoil when Prakriti says, "Must the king of the forest crash to the dust, at last, his cloud-kissing glory broken?" As the play advances, it portrays another image of the monk immersed in flames. It describes the internal fire of purity in the monk fighting against the serpent-like fire of the spell cast by Prakriti's mother, bolted in a dangerous fight to the finish. The image ended with torture on the monk's face signifying his collapse towards the mighty spell.

5. What is the role of the mother in Prakriti's self-realisation? What are her hopes and fears for her daughter?

Answer. Prakriti's mother knew the weight of casting the wicked spell on the monk. Her mother would usually act as a voice in Prakriti's life. Prakriti's mother had no choice but to support her daughter's wish, which was impossible. She loved her daughter so much that she reminded her of the severe consequences of this cowardly act that she was going to perform. She knew the powerful spell she cast upon the monk would take a toll on her life as well. By then, Prakriti overcomes grief and realises that she has slaughtered the monk's purity and subjected him to horrifying pain by dragging him to her against his will. Her mother

makes her look into the mirror and witness his suffering so that she comes to her senses. Prakriti comprehends this, but it claims her mother's life in undoing the spell.

6. 'Acceptance of one's fate is easy. Questioning the imbalance of the human social order is tumultuous.' Discuss with reference to the play.

Answer. Tagore's play 'Chandalika' is based upon the following Buddhist legend. Ananda, the famous disciple of the Buddha, teaches lower-caste girl human values. He once met a girl Prakriti, a lower caste chandala girl condemned by birth to a despised caste. She was made to feel unclean by society. The Buddhist monk speaks words of wisdom regarding her growth as a human in the community. She suddenly awakens to her consciousness of full rights as a woman and believes in the humanity of a follower of the Buddha. He accepts water from her hand and teaches 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 to the community. However, she overcomes the fear of facing society and tries to go against humanity and loses her mother. She questions the imbalance that brought forth the self-realisation of her worth and imparted a sense of equality. If she had accepted her fate, she would have survived as an 'untouchable' throughout her life, which is an easier path, but it wouldn't have brought her happiness in the long run. Therefore, 'Acceptance of one's fate is easy. Questioning the imbalance of the human social order is tumultuous'.

Appreciation

1. How does the dramatic technique suit the theme of the play?

Answer. Tagore's play 'Chandalika' highlights the social condition and the inequality existing in his time. It is a play weaving the themes of equality in caste and gender, class struggles and the triumph of good over evil. In different segments of the play, he uses symbolism to represent the themes. The lower caste girl, Prakriti, serves water to the monk, a symbol of purity, washing away all the stigma of her birth that society had imposed upon her. She realises her stature and rights as a human being and aspires to achieve equality in society. Blindly driven by her lust for the monk, Prakriti risks her mother's life and the devoutness of Ananda, the monk. She forces her mother to draw him towards her by using her magical powers. The dramatic technique of using dishonesty to overpower holiness meets with a fatal end in the play.

2. By focusing attention on the consciousness of an outcast girl, the play sensitises the viewer/reader to the injustice of distinctions based on the accidents of human birth. Discuss how individual conflict is highlighted against the backdrop of social reality.

Answer. Tagore's play 'Chandalika' portrays the lower caste girl Prakriti's conflict against the backdrop of social reality. The Buddhist monk imparts wisdom through his words and his action of consuming water from the girl, glorifying her position in society, and breaking all the barriers. Prakriti, being ignored and insulted in society all her life due to the stigma associated with her birth, finds freedom in the realisation of her value. Unable to restrain herself, she fell in love with the monk and made her mother, who knew the art of magic, work her spell on him, putting her mother's life in danger. Despite being aware that he was sworn to celibacy, she began to desire him, craving for his return and offering herself to him, which was highly impossible. Thus, the individual conflict of freedom and desire is highlighted against the backdrop of the harsh social reality.

3. 'I will enthrone you on the summit of all my dishonour, and build your royal seat of my shame, my fear and my joy'. Pick out more such examples of the interplay of opposites from the text. What does this device succeed in conveying?

Answer. There are a few examples of the interplay of opposites in the play 'Chandalika'. That is – "I started up trembling and bowed before his feet, without touching them." – The interplay of words firmly put forth Prakriti's feelings for the Buddhist monk. She trembles before him and is aware that her desire to possess him is highly impossible in society. She knew that her wish would lead to her being shunned and dishonoured by society. Despite that, she purely respects the monk in her heart. The interplay of such opposite ideas strongly expresses the author's opinions, conveying to his readers.

4. 'Shadow, mist, storm' on the one hand, 'flames, fire,' on the other. Comment on the effect of these and similar images of contrast on the viewer/reader.

Answer. The author depicts opposing forces while narrating the story of Prakriti, her mother and Ananda, the monk. There are many such instances of contrasting images used in the play since the contrast creates powerful text connotations. However, these phrases' effects are associated with the similar nature of the social order, which discriminates against equal human beings based on their birth. Thus, the comparative appear less distant as opposed to individual dissimilarities.

