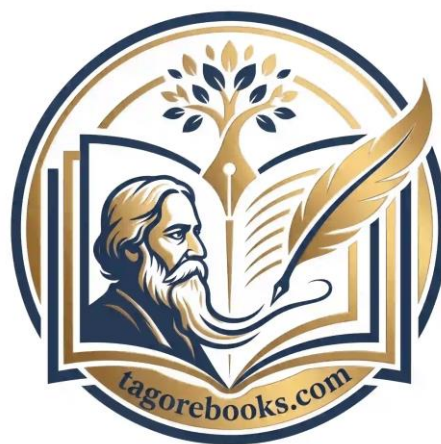


PLAY

CHANDALIKA

Rabindranath Tagore



Contents

PREFACE	2
SCENE ONE.....	3
SCENE TWO	14
NOTES	21

PREFACE

The story of this play is taken from the brief account of the Shardulakarna Avadana given in *Nepalese Buddhist Literature*, edited by Rajendralal Mitra.

The setting of the story is Shravasti. The Lord Buddha was at that time residing in the garden of Anathapindada. One day his beloved disciple Ananda, having finished his meal at a householder's home, felt thirsty on his way back to the monastery. He saw a Chandal girl,* named Prakriti, drawing water from a well. He asked her for water, and she gave it to him. Seeing his beauty, the girl was enchanted. Seeing no other way to win him, she sought her mother's help. Her mother was versed in sorcery.

The mother smeared the courtyard with cow-dung, prepared an altar there, lit a fire upon it, and, chanting incantations, cast into that fire, one by one, a hundred and eight arka flowers. Ananda could not resist the power of this sorcery. That night he came and arrived at her house. When he took his seat upon the altar, Prakriti began to lay out a bed for him. Then remorse arose in Ananda's heart, and he began to weep, praying to the Lord for deliverance.

The Lord Buddha, knowing by his supernatural power the state of his disciple, recited a Buddhist mantra. By the strength of that mantra, the Chandal woman's art of enchantment grew weak, and Ananda returned to the monastery.

SCENE ONE

MOTHER. Prakriti! O Prakriti! Where has she gone now! Heaven knows what has become of the girl. I cannot find her anywhere in the house.

PRAKRITI. Here I am, Mother — I am right here.

MOTHER. Where?

PRAKRITI. Why, here — at the well.

MOTHER. You astonish me. The morning is long past noon, the sun cracks the very earth, the ground has grown so hot a foot can scarcely bear it. The household's water was drawn hours ago, at daybreak. Every girl in the neighbourhood has long since carried her water home. Look there — the crow sits panting on the amloki branch, beak open in the heat. And here you sit, soaking up this Baisakh sun, to no purpose at all. I have heard the old tale, how Uma once left her home to do penance out in the open, scorched by the sun† — has that same thing come over you?

PRAKRITI. Yes, Mother — penance is indeed what I am doing.

MOTHER. You astonish me! For whom?

PRAKRITI. For the one who called to me.

SONG *He who has called to me, who has called to me, who has given speech to me, who had no voice — he who has come to know my name — oh, let his name alone remain within my heart.*

MOTHER. What call was this?

PRAKRITI. He left ringing within my heart the words — "give me water."

MOTHER. Ill-fated girl! He said to you, "give me water"! And who, pray, was this? Someone of your own caste?

PRAKRITI. Why, that is just what he said — that he is of my own caste, indeed.

MOTHER. Did you not hide your caste? Did you tell him you were a Chandal woman?

PRAKRITI. I told him. He said — that is a falsehood. He said: what does it matter if you call the black cloud of Shravan a Chandal — its nature does not change for that, nor does its water lose its virtue. He said: do not revile yourself. Self-contempt is a sin, greater even than self-slaughter.

MOTHER. What is this I hear from your own mouth? Have you called to mind some tale of a former birth?

PRAKRITI. This is a tale of my new birth.

MOTHER. You make me laugh. A new birth! And when did this come to pass?

PRAKRITI. That day the noon bell had just struck in the palace, and the sun was blazing fierce. I was bathing the motherless calf in the water of the well. Of a sudden, before me, stood a Buddhist monk, in his saffron robe. He said, "Give me water." My very life leapt within me — I trembled, and made my obeisance from a distance. His form was fashioned, it seemed, out of the light of early dawn. I said, "I am a Chandal's daughter — the water of this well is unclean." He said: the man that I am, you too are that same. All water is the water of a holy shrine, if it cools the burning and satisfies the thirsty. Never before had I heard such words; and never before did I so give a single handful of water — I, whose heart would tremble even to take a single speck of dust from his feet.

MOTHER. Foolish girl — how has your heart grown so bold, all of a sudden! This madness will need a penance. Do you not know into what lineage you were born?

PRAKRITI. He took but a single handful of water from my hand, and that water became fathomless, without end. The seven seas became one in that water; my lineage was drowned in it, my birth washed away.

MOTHER. Why, even your very speech has changed! Some sorcery has been worked upon your very words. Do you yourself understand anything of what you are saying?

PRAKRITI. Was there no water anywhere else, Mother, in the whole city of Shravasti? Why did he come, of all places, to this very well? This is what I call the turning of a new birth. He came to grant me the crown of one who slakes a man's thirst. It was this very merit, this great virtue, that he was seeking. The water by

which his vow was fulfilled — he could have found it nowhere else, at no shrine at all. He told me — at the very outset of her exile in the forest, Sita bathed in this same water, and it was Guhaka the Chandal who drew it and brought it to her.‡ Ever since, my heart has been dancing within me; day and night I hear, in a deep voice — give me water, give me water.

SONG *It says — give me water, give me water! I shall give it — who has given me such a store to give? Gazing toward the black cloud, the rain-bird comes flying, distraught with longing — give me water, give me water. A spring, lost beneath the earth, in darkness, in its prison. Whose voice, deep and profound, came and struck the black bed of stone — give me water, give me water.*

MOTHER. I do not know, child — this bodes no good to me. I do not understand this game of their spells. Today I no longer know your words; tomorrow I shall not even know your face. This is a spell of theirs that changes the very soul.

PRAKRITI. You have simply never known me, all this while. He who has known me shall make me known to you as well. And so I sit here, watching. The noon bell rings at the palace gate; the girls carry their water home; the osprey flies alone in the distant sky; and I bring my pitcher and sit here, at the well, beside the road.

MOTHER. For whom?

PRAKRITI. For the traveller.

MOTHER. What traveller will come to you, foolish girl!

PRAKRITI. That one traveller, Mother — that one traveller alone. Within him are contained all the travellers of every road in the world. Day after day passes, and he does not come. He gave no word, and yet he gave his word — why, then, has he not kept it? My heart has become like a desert; all day it lies bare and desolate, the hot wind moans across it, and it — it cannot give water. No one has come to ask for it.

SONG *There is thirst in my eyes, oh, thirst that fills my breast entire. I am a rainless day of Baisakh, my life burns away in its own torment. A storm has risen in the scorching wind, driving my mind out into the far, empty void, and my very veil goes flying off. The flower that once lit up the grove has withered now, and turned to black. Who has set a barrier against the spring — bound fast by the tyranny of heat, upon sorrow's own high, jagged peak.*

MOTHER. I cannot understand a word you say today — heaven knows what intoxication has taken hold of you. Tell me plainly, what is it you want?

PRAKRITI. I want him. He came, of a sudden, and made known to me that even my own service might have its place in the Creator's household — such a wondrous thing to say! I am one who may serve — take up this word, lift it from the dust, this thorn-apple flower, and set it close against his breast.

MOTHER. Remember this, Prakriti — their words are for the ear alone, not for putting into practice. There is no iron spade anywhere in the world that can break down the mud wall of the caste into which, by the fault of your own fate, you were born. You are unclean; do not go scattering your uncleanness abroad — stay carefully within the small space that is your own. Beyond this little place, everywhere else, your very presence is an offence.

PRAKRITI. *(Song) The flower says: blessed am I upon the earth, O God — for it is my lot to serve you. I was born in the dust, but of your mercy let me forget that — there is no dust within my heart. Bend your eyes low upon me, my petals tremble, quiver upon quiver. Grant me, grant me the touch of your foot, make the dust's own poor wealth divine — I am the earth's own obeisance, offered up to you.*

MOTHER. Child, I can understand a little of what you say. You are a woman — in service alone lies your worship, in service alone your sovereignty. In a single instant a woman may leap clean across the bounds of caste; let the veil of fortune only slip aside for a moment, and every one of them is found to hold, within her, a share of queenship. And you, too, once had your own chance. Out hunting, the King's own son came once to this very well of yours. Do you remember?

PRAKRITI. Yes, I remember.

MOTHER. Why did you not go to the King's own house? He was quite lost, seeing your beauty.

PRAKRITI. Lost, indeed — lost to the very fact that I was a human being. He had gone out to kill beasts; his eye fell upon a beast, and it was that beast he wished to bind in a golden chain.

MOTHER. And yet, even as prey, he had marked that face of yours. But this monk of yours — has he even known you as a woman at all?

PRAKRITI. You will not understand, you will never understand. I have understood this: that after all this time, he was the first to truly know me. It is a very wondrous thing.

SONG O — *through your own eyes, true sight has opened wide; you are the first who has fashioned my own true form. To you my obeisance, to you my obeisance, to you my obeisance, a hundred times over. I am a young streak of the dawn, I am a line of pure, spotless light, I am the first blessed rain falling from a fresh, dark-green cloud. To you my obeisance, to you my obeisance, to you my obeisance, a hundred times over.*

I want him, Mother. I want him beyond all else. I wish to lay before him, arrayed and offered, this whole basket of my life's worship. His feet will not be defiled by it. Let everyone see my boldness. I wish to say, with pride: I am your handmaiden — for otherwise, in this world, I must remain bound forever, a slave-woman at the feet of every man alive.

MOTHER. Why do you rage so, to no purpose, child? It is your very birth to be a slave. Who can undo what the Creator has written?

PRAKRITI. For shame, Mother, for shame — I tell you again, do not forget it: spread no false slander against your own self — that too is a sin! In the houses of kings, in every household, slave-women are born by the score — yet I am not a slave. In the houses of Brahmins, in every land, Chandals are born — yet I am not a Chandal.

MOTHER. I know no words left with which I can speak to you any longer. Very well — I myself shall go to him. I shall clasp his feet and say: take your rice from every other house as you will, but come to my house only to take a single handful of water.

PRAKRITI. *(Song) No, no — I will not call him, will not call him so, from without. If I am able, I shall send my call into his own heart, and draw him to me so. The ache of giving sounds within the depths of my breast; but where the one who might receive it now wanders, I do not know — who shall bring about this meeting of the giving and the taking? Will my own sorrow not meet with his sorrow? Will the stream of the Ganga not mingle with the dark waters of the Yamuna? Of itself, what melody has risen and begun to sound — it has come of itself, unbidden; and when it went, it left behind a word of hope.*

When the earth itself lies cracked and split for want of rain, Mother, what use is it to gather one small pitcher of water? Will not the cloud come of its own accord, drawn by its own longing, filling the whole sky?

MOTHER. What is the use of talking so? If the cloud comes of itself, it comes; if it does not, it simply does not. If the fields all wither and dry, what concern is that of ours? We can only gaze up at the sky — what else is there to do?

PRAKRITI. That will not do. I will not sit and merely gaze. You know sorcery — let that very sorcery become the bond of my own arms, and draw him here to me.

MOTHER. Reckless girl — what is this you say! Your daring only grows and grows, I see! This is to play with fire! These are no common men! Set a spell upon such as these? My heart trembles even to hear it.

PRAKRITI. And with what boldness did you once offer to cast a spell for the King's own son?

MOTHER. I do not fear a king — the worst he can do is impale me on a stake. But these men here — they do nothing at all to punish, and that is what I fear.

PRAKRITI. I fear nothing else at all now. What I fear is only this: that I shall sink back down again, forget myself again, and go back once more into that dark chamber. That would be worse than death itself. He must be brought here — and that I dare to say such a thing, and say it with such force, is that not itself a wonder? It is he himself who has worked this very wonder in me. Will no greater wonder come to pass, then? Will he not come and sit beside me? Will he not rest upon the edge of my own sari's fold?

MOTHER. I may perhaps be able to bring him — but can you pay the price of it? Nothing at all will be left to you afterward!

PRAKRITI. No — let nothing be left at all. Let that debt of mine, carried through birth after birth, be nothing at all — let it be paid off entirely, and I shall be saved indeed. That is exactly why I want him. Let nothing at all remain that is mine. My waiting through age after age shall find its fulfilment in this one birth — my heart tells me so, again and again. It shall be fulfilled. That is why I heard such a wondrous thing — give me water. Today I have learned that I, too, am able to give. This was the one truth everyone had kept hidden from me, all this while. I shall give, I shall give — today I sit here, waiting on his road, for the sake of giving him everything I have.

MOTHER. Have you no regard left for religion at all?

PRAKRITI. How can I answer that! I hold to him alone who holds me in regard. Any religion that deals in contempt is itself a falsehood. It was by blinding me, by stopping my mouth, that everyone together forced that religion upon me. But from that day, I have been forbidden to hold to that religion any longer. I have no fear left at all now — recite your spell, bring the monk here, to the side of the Chandal's daughter. I myself shall give him honour — such honour as no one else on this earth could ever give him.

SONG *It is him alone I know, him alone I know, who knows me for his own — it is on his gift that my own claim rests, he whose right lies in my own gift to him. Whoever is able to know me, by that very knowing I come to know him too; one same light lies upon the path of knowing, in his life, and in mine alike. Among those who wrapped themselves round in the darkness of their own minds, I was one who had lost herself. He touched me with a wand of gold, and the covering of sleep was torn away; my eyes have gone running now toward that face which has made all things bright.*

MOTHER. Do you not fear the falling of a curse upon you?

PRAKRITI. A curse has lain upon me since the very hour of my birth. The poison of one curse may well consume the poison of another. I will hear no more of this, Mother — I will not, I will not. Begin your incantation. I cannot bear this delay any longer.

MOTHER. Very well, then — tell me his name.

PRAKRITI. His name is Ananda.

MOTHER. Ananda? The disciple of the Lord Buddha?

PRAKRITI. Yes — that very monk.

MOTHER. You are the treasure torn from my own breast, the very apple of my eye — for your sake alone do I set my hand to so great a sin.

PRAKRITI. What sin is this! I mean only to bring near to me the one who brings all others near to him — what fault can there be in that?

MOTHER. They draw men to themselves by the strength of their own merit. We draw them by our spells — by the very noose that draws in beasts. We only churn up the mire from the depths.

PRAKRITI. Even so — even so it is well. For without the churning, nothing can be raised up out of the mire at all.

MOTHER. O great one, you who are a man of true greatness — whatever power I have to do you wrong, your own power to forgive is far greater still. Lord, though I sit here about to do you dishonour, accept, even so, my obeisance.

PRAKRITI. What is it you fear, Mother! It is I myself who recite the spell, through your mother's mouth. If my own sorrow draws him here to me, and if that itself should be an offence, then let me commit that offence — let me commit it. Any law that holds only punishment within it, and no comfort at all, I will not obey.

SONG *Call me guilty, call me guilty. Take up this faded flower, fallen in the dust, and set it beneath your feet. This basket, filled full with my own offences — empty it with your own two hands, and then, into that same emptied basket, pour in your own compassion. You are exalted, I am nothing at all — I shall catch you in a snare woven of my own offence. Surely your own merit will wash my fault clean of every stain — string all my failings together upon forgiveness, and wear them, so strung, about your own throat.*

MOTHER. What boldness is this in you, Prakriti!

PRAKRITI. My boldness! Consider instead the strength of his! What no one else could ever say to me, he said with such ease — give me water. That small utterance — what power it held! It lit up my whole life; the black stone that had pressed forever upon my breast, he pushed it aside, and a stream of sweetness came welling up. Your fear is groundless — you have simply never seen him. All that morning he had gone begging alms through the city of Shravasti; he came across the open field, past the burning-ground, along the river's bank, the fierce sun beating on his bare head. And why? For no other reason than to say that one thing, even to a girl such as I — give me water! I could die of it, I could die! From where did such compassion descend, such love! It descended upon the very one who was most unworthy of all, the most fearful of all. What have I to fear now! Give me water! That water has been overflowing the whole of my life, brimming over — if I cannot give it, I shall not live at all. Give me water! In a single instant I have come to know: I have water — water without end — and to whom shall I make this known? That is why I call to

him, day and night. If he cannot hear me, never fear — go on, recite your spell. He will bear it. He will bear it.

MOTHER. Look there, Prakriti — who are those, going along the road across the field, wearing the saffron robe?

PRAKRITI. Why, so it is — I see now, it is the whole company of monks from the Sangha. Do you not hear? They are chanting a mantra.

THE MONKS ON THE ROAD. (*chanting, in Pali*)§

"The Buddha, wholly pure, a great ocean of compassion, whose eye of purest, highest wisdom sees all things; who is the slayer of the world's sin and its every affliction — him, the Buddha, do I revere, with all reverence."

PRAKRITI. Mother — there, he goes, at the very head of them all. He did not so much as turn his face toward this well. He might have said it once more, at least — give me water. I had thought he could never leave me behind, that I was a new creation of his own hand. (*She sinks down, striking her head against the ground, again and again.*) This earth — this earth — this earth alone is your own, wretched girl. Who was it that raised you up into the light, if only for a single moment? Can that be called compassion at all? In the end, you must fall back into this same earth — you must lie mingled with it forever, beneath the feet of every soul that ever walks this road.

MOTHER. Child, forget it, forget all of this. They have shattered your one moment's dream, and now they go their way — let them go, let them go. Whatever was never meant to last, the sooner it passes, the better.

PRAKRITI. This daily want, want, want — this insult renewed at every moment — this caged bird within my breast, beating its wings against the bars until it dies — is this what you call a dream? That which fastens its teeth into every vein of the heart, and will not let go — is that a dream? And they, over there, who have no bond at all, no joy or sorrow at all, no burden of household or family at all — who float away like the clouds of autumn — is it they who are truly awake? Are they not, rather, the dream?

MOTHER. I cannot bear to watch your suffering, Prakriti. Rise up. I shall bring him here, by the strength of my spell — I shall bring him back, along this very road of dust. I shall break that pride of his that says "I want nothing at all" — he shall come running, crying "I want, I want," and nothing else.

PRAKRITI. Mother, your spell dates from the very dawn of created life. Theirs is a raw, unripened thing — a matter of only the other day. They can never stand against you. At the pull of your spell, the very knot of theirs will come undone. He must lose, he must lose.

MOTHER. Where are they going?

PRAKRITI. This much I know — that they go, and yet they go nowhere at all. The rains will come before long, and then they will settle for the four months of retreat. Then they will move on again, heaven knows where. And this is what they call being awake!

MOTHER. Foolish girl, then what do you mean, speaking of my spell? He is going farther and farther away — from where am I to call him back?

PRAKRITI. Wherever he goes, he must be turned back — no distance is too far for your spell.

SONG *Let him go, if go he must, to the very edge of the sea. Let him come back, let him come back, let him return. I shall keep a seat spread out and waiting, here within my heart; I shall drench the dust of his road with the water of my own tears. Let him go, if go he must, to the mountain's very crest. Let him come back, let him come back. I shall lie hidden in the mountain's own cave, and call to him from there — my own dream shall lie encircling his waking, all the while.*

He showed me no mercy — I shall show him none either. Recite the cruellest spell you know — let it wind itself, coil upon coil, mark upon mark, about his very mind. Where can he go, to escape me? How could he ever manage it?

MOTHER. Do not trouble yourself. It shall not prove impossible. I shall give you the Mirror of Illusion. Take it in your hand, and dance with it — his shadow shall fall upon it. In that very mirror you shall see what becomes of him, and how far he has come.

PRAKRITI. Look there — clouds are gathering in the west, storm-clouds. The spell will work, Mother, it will work. His dry striving will be blown away like a withered leaf. The lamp will go out. He will not be able to see his own path. Round and round he will wander, and come at last to fall here, at this very door — just as a bird, its nest torn apart by a midnight storm, comes down at last into some dark and unknown courtyard. My heart is pounding, pounding; lightning flashes within my mind; a sea rises up, foaming wave upon wave, and I can see no shore to it at all.

MOTHER. Consider it once more, even now. Will you not start back in fear, midway through it? Will your patience hold? Once the force of the spell has risen to its height, if I should suddenly try to stop it, my own life would go out with it. Everything that can burn must be burned to ash before the fire itself goes out — remember that well.

PRAKRITI. Whom are you afraid for? Is he such a man as that, to be so easily undone? Nothing at all shall touch him — let him come, then, all the way, treading path after path of fire. I can see it already, within my own mind — ahead of us, a night of cosmic ruin, the storm of union, the joy of breaking apart.

SONG *Within my heart the drum of Shiva has thundered, rolling deep; the brow of the dense cloud has knit itself, dark and furrowed; every forest, every grove has thrilled and trembled; who is that guest, swaying restless upon the swing of my own breast, in this dream of union? The night, thick with the sound of ceaseless rain, startled and trembling at the crash of thunder; the malati-vine shivers in every leaf, with a plaintive, murmuring cry; the whole wood lies in dread, ringing with the cricket's shrill alarm.*

SCENE TWO

PRAKRITI. My heart will burst! I cannot look into the mirror — I cannot bear it. What a terrible whirlwind of sorrow. Will the great forest tree, in the end, come crashing down into the dust, splintering as it falls — its sky-piercing glory shattered at last?

MOTHER. Listen, child — if you say the word, even now, I will try to call back my own spell. If my own veins should tear apart in the doing of it, if my own life should go with it — let it be so, and welcome; but let that great soul, at least, be spared.

PRAKRITI. Yes — that is well, Mother. Let your spell be. There is no more need of it. No — no, no, no — how much further can the road be, after all! Let him come, then, all the way — let him come, right to this very breast of mine. And then I shall settle every sorrow of his, emptying out my whole world for his sake. The traveller shall arrive in the depth of night; with the whole burning of my own breast I shall light a lamp for him; there is a spring of nectar deep within me, and in its water shall he be consecrated — he who is weary, who is scorched, who is wounded through and through. Once more he shall ask — give me water — the water of my own heart's ocean! That day will come. Let your spell go on. Let it go on.

SONG *With my own sorrow I shall settle your sorrow; I shall bathe you in the fathomless water of my own boundless grief. I shall set my whole world alight for your sake; this stain of delusion shall be washed clean; the very pain of death itself I shall offer up as a gift at your feet.*

MOTHER. I did not know it would take so long, child. My spell is nearing its end, I think. My very life has risen to my throat.

PRAKRITI. Have no fear, Mother — bear it just a little longer. Only a little. There is not much longer to wait.

MOTHER. Ashadh has come already — their four months' retreat must have begun.

PRAKRITI. They have gone to Vaishali, to the Gosira Sangharama.¶

MOTHER. How cruel you are! That is a very great distance.

PRAKRITI. Not so very far. Seven days' journey. And fifteen days have already gone by. By now, it seems to me, his seat has begun to tremble; he is coming, he is

coming — that which was so very far, a hundred thousand leagues away, beyond the sun and moon themselves, beyond the utmost reach of my two hands — that very thing is drawing near. He is coming; my breast trembles as though the earth itself were quaking.

MOTHER. I have completed every last part of the spell — a spell that could draw even thunder-wielding Indra himself down to earth. And yet it delays so long. What a deadly battle must be raging. What did you see, in the mirror?

PRAKRITI. At first I saw the whole sky choked with mist, like the pale face of a god grown weary from battling a demon. Fire kept breaking out through the gaps in the mist. Then the mist tore apart, cluster by cluster — like some vast, swollen boil bursting open — and the colour turned to red. That day passed. The next day I saw dense black cloud massed behind him, lightning playing through it, and there he stood before it, fire blazing all about his body. My blood ran cold. I ran to tell you — stop the spell at once, I meant to say. I found you there, eyes fixed and staring like Shiva's own, sitting stiff as wood, your breath coming quick and hard, senseless to everything. It seemed to me that somewhere within you too a fire was burning, blazing on and on. The very flame in which he has wrapped himself — your own fire-serpent was striking at it, hissing, again and again, and a fierce duel was raging between them. I came back, lifted the mirror once more, and looked — the light was gone. There was only sorrow, sorrow, sorrow — the very image of a grief without end.

MOTHER. And you did not fall down dead, seeing that! Some flash of it struck through my own life as well — it seemed to me I could bear no more of it.

PRAKRITI. That sorrow whose shape I saw was not his alone — it was mine as well; it belonged to the two of us together. In that terrible fire, copper has melted and mingled together with gold.

MOTHER. Did no fear rise in your heart?

PRAKRITI. Something far greater than fear — it seemed to me I saw the god of creation himself, more terrible than the god of cosmic ruin — lashing the very fire to do his work, while the fire only growled and roared beneath the lash. In the crucible of the seven metals, laid there before his feet — what is it that lies within? Life, or death? A kind of joy began to swell within my own heart. What shall I call it? The vast, austere renunciation of a new creation. No thought, no fear, no pity, no sorrow in it at all — only breaking, blazing up, melting down, sparks flying off on

every side. I could not stay still — my whole body and mind rose up, dancing, like a tongue of flame itself.

SONG *O great sorrow, O Rudra, O terrible one, O Shankara, O lord of cosmic dissolution.** Let all that moves and all that stands unmoving be torn and shattered by the bite of the fire-serpents that stream from your matted hair; let your great bow, Pinaka, ring out again and again, clang upon clang, its fierce and thunderous note.*

MOTHER. And how did your monk himself appear to you?

PRAKRITI. I saw his gaze, unblinking, fixed on some point far off, like a star in the twilight sky. It made me wish to go far away from myself — an infinite distance away.

MOTHER. And were you dancing before the mirror, all that while? Could he see you?

PRAKRITI. Shame, shame upon me! What disgrace! Again and again, it seemed to me, his eyes reddened, as though he were about to curse me. And then, at once, he would set his own foot upon the very embers of his own anger, and crush them out. In the end I saw his anger turn back, trembling like a spear, upon himself alone — and it struck home, deep into his own heart.

MOTHER. And you bore all of it?

PRAKRITI. I was struck with wonder at myself. That I — I, this very self, this daughter of yours, of no address, of no lineage that anyone could name — that his sorrow and this one's sorrow should today have become one and the same. In what sacrifice of creation does such a thing come to pass — who could ever have imagined so great a thing!

MOTHER. When will this whole tumult come to rest?

PRAKRITI. Not until my own sorrow is at rest. Until then, I shall go on giving him sorrow. If I myself find no release, how shall he ever find his?

MOTHER. When did you last look into the mirror?

PRAKRITI. Last evening. He passed through the great lion-gate of Vaishali some days ago, in the depth of night — in secret, I think, without telling the other monks. Since then I have seen him at times crossing a river by ferry-boat; I have seen him

upon some impassable mountain; I have seen him alone in an open field as evening fell; I have seen him in darkness, deep in the night, upon some forest path. As the days go by, the dream's own trance grows thicker upon him; he goes on now without any thought or judgement at all, every struggle within himself brought to its end. There is a kind of daze upon his face, a kind of slackness in his whole body — as though nothing at all lies before his eyes any longer; no truth, no falsehood; no good, no evil; only a thoughtless, blind aim, carrying no meaning whatsoever.

MOTHER. Can you guess where he has come to, today?

PRAKRITI. Yesterday at dusk I saw him at the village of Patala, on the bank of the river Upali. The new rains had set the water rushing wild; near the ghat there stood an old pipal tree, fireflies burning on every branch, and beneath it a moss-grown altar — and it was there, of a sudden, that he stopped short, startled. It is a place he has known for a long time; I have heard that it was there the Lord Buddha once sat and gave counsel to King Suprabhasa. He covered his face with both hands and sank down — as though his dream had, of a sudden, broken. At that very moment I flung the mirror aside — I was afraid, I do not know of what I might see. Since then the whole day has passed; I have wished to know nothing more; hoping, and giving up hope, by turns — so have I sat, all this while. And now night is coming on, dark and heavy. The watchman goes crying his hour along the road — a whole watch has passed already, I think! There is no more time, no more time, Mother — do not let this night go for nothing. Put all your strength now into that spell.

MOTHER. I can bear no more, child. My spell is growing weak; my own life and body have both gone numb.

PRAKRITI. You must not grow weak now. Do not let go the reins. Perhaps he has already turned his face back toward home; perhaps the bond has reached its final, breaking strain — perhaps it will not hold. Perhaps he will slip out of this life of mine altogether, and I shall never be able to catch hold of him again. Then it will be my turn to dream — the illusion-image of the Chandal girl once more. I could not bear to endure that falsehood. I fall at your feet, Mother — give it, this once, everything you have. Now, begin your Bhumi-Mantra, the spell of the Earth Herself — let even the blessed Tushita heaven of the righteous begin to tremble.††

SONG *I am your own daughter of the earth, O Mother Vasundhara. Then why has my own human birth been cheated of its due? I know you to be pure, a pure and holy native soil — I, a daughter of mankind, am blessed indeed, filled full with the merit of a living soul. For the sake of what heaven do they hold you in such contempt, I,*

who dwell here upon your very breast? For I am yours, utterly, entirely near to you — grant me your own enchanting power, that steals away the heart and the very life.

MOTHER. Have you made yourself ready, then, exactly as I told you?

PRAKRITI. I have! Last night was the second night of the bright fortnight — I bathed, full immersion, in the deep pool. See here — with rice grains, with pomegranate blossom, with vermilion, with the seven jewels, I have drawn the sacred circle in the courtyard. I have planted the little yellow cloth banners; I have laid out the garland and sandal-paste on the tray; I have lit the lamp. After my bath I put on a cloth the colour of paddy-shoots, and a veil the colour of champak. Facing east, I have sat all night in meditation on his form. Upon my left wrist I have tied a rakhi†† of sixteen golden threads, knotted sixteen times over.

MOTHER. Very well, then — dance now your dance of invocation. Circle the altar. I shall recite the spell here, beside it.

PRAKRITI. *(Song) Come into my own shut and folded bud, in the nectar of its fragrance. Come into my own unnamed depth of darkness, in a night of splendour. This oyster-shell of mine, worth nothing at all — come, and set it free, in a single grain of pearl. Upon the strings of my own silent vina, come, in the shape of music. Come, the summons of a new dawn — let the endless night find its ending — come. Come in the fair, smiling morning star, come in the falling dew, in tears, and dress the very dawn in vermilion with your own first ray of light.*

MOTHER. Prakriti — take up your mirror now, and look. Do you see — a black shadow has fallen across the altar? My heart is breaking; I can bear no more. Look in the mirror — how much longer now?

PRAKRITI. No — I will not look, I will not. I shall listen within my own heart, within my own meditation. I would rather see him suddenly, before me, should he choose to show himself. Bear it a little longer, Mother — he will show himself, surely he will. Look there — a storm has risen, suddenly, the storm of his coming; the very earth trembles beneath the weight of his footsteps; my own breast rolls and thunders within me.

MOTHER. It is your own curse that comes, wretched girl. You have killed me, killed me! I think my very veins have torn apart.

PRAKRITI. No curse, no curse at all — it brings my own new birth; the great lion-gate of death itself is opening, struck by the very hammer of thunder. The door is

broken, the wall is broken, every falsehood of this whole life of mine is broken. My mind trembles with fear; my very life sways with joy. O my own ruin, O my own all — you have come — upon the very summit of all my shame I shall set you now; I shall build your throne there. Out of my own disgrace, out of my own fear, out of my own joy, I shall build it.

MOTHER. My own hour is coming upon me now. I can bear no more. Look, quickly, into your mirror.

PRAKRITI. Mother — I am afraid now. His road is coming to its very end — and after that? What comes after that? Only this — only me! Nothing more than that at all. Shall all this long, cruel sorrow find its fullness in me alone? Only me? To what end, then, so long, so impassable a road! Where does it end, this road! Only in me, in this poor self!

SONG *Where does the road end, where does it end, what lies there, at its end? Where does all this longing, all this striving, come to rest at last? Waves rise and fall in the mire, before me a dense and heavy darkness — in what land, if any, does the further shore lie? Today I think to myself, in this chasing after a mere mirage, perhaps there is no end at all to thirst — and that thought fills me now with dread — a grief with broken rudder, torn sail, sailing on toward no destination at all.*

MOTHER. O cruel girl, have mercy on me — I can endure no more. Look in the mirror, quickly.

PRAKRITI. *(She looks into the mirror, and at once flings it away.)* Mother — oh, Mother, oh — stop, stop, stop, stop! Call back your spell, call it back! At once, at once! You wretched sorceress, what have you done, what have you done — why did you not die before this! What have I seen! Oh, where now is that shining brightness, that spotless purity, that light of some far heaven! What weariness, what desolation, what a monstrous burden of self-defeat he carries, coming now to my door! He comes with his head bowed low! Let it be, let it be — let all of this be done with — *(she kicks and scatters the instruments of the spell with her foot)* — you — if you will not cease to be a Chandal woman, at least do not heap dishonour upon a hero. Victory to him — victory, victory to him!

ANANDA enters.

Lord, you have come to save me — and it is for that, then, that you have suffered so much sorrow — forgive me, forgive me. Drive out this boundless disgrace of mine with a single blow of your foot. It was I who dragged you down into this earth —

how else could you ever have raised me up into your own realm of merit! O spotless one, dust has touched your feet — let that very touching by dust find its worth, its fulfilment, in this. Let the veil of my own delusion fall away at your feet; let it take with it all this dust. Victory — victory to you, victory to you!

MOTHER. Victory, Lord. My sin, and my own life together, fall now at your feet; here, upon the very shore of your forgiveness, my days come to their end.

[She dies.]

ANANDA. *(chanting, in Pali)*

"The Buddha, wholly pure, a great ocean of compassion, whose eye of purest, highest wisdom sees all things; who is the slayer of the world's sin and its every affliction — him, the Buddha, do I revere, with all reverence."

NOTES

* *Chandal* — in traditional Hindu society, the name of the lowest, "untouchable" caste, associated with the handling of the dead and considered ritually impure to those of higher caste; a Chandal woman's touch, or even her voice, was traditionally held to defile.

† *Uma's penance* — a reference to the goddess Parvati (Uma), who in Hindu myth performed years of austerity, exposed to sun and storm, to win Shiva as her husband.

‡ A reference to the *Ramayana*: as Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana set out into their forest exile, they were ferried across the Ganges by Guha, chieftain of the Nishada hunter-folk — here loosely folded, for the play's argument, into the same low-caste category as the Chandal.

§ This Pali verse (*Buddho susuddho karuṇāmahaṇṇavo...*) is a well-known traditional formula of homage to the Buddha, still recited in Theravada liturgy.

|| The four-month rains retreat (*vassa*), during which wandering Buddhist monks traditionally settled in one place rather than travelling.

¶ Gosira Sangharama — a monastery associated with Vaishali in early Buddhist accounts.

** *Rudra* and *Shankara* are both names of Shiva in his fiercer, more destructive aspect; *Pinaka* is Shiva's great bow.

†† *Vasundhara* — the Earth herself, personified as goddess and mother. *Tushita* — in Buddhist cosmology, one of the heavens of the gods, said to be the abode of a Buddha-to-be before his final birth on earth.

‡‡ A *rakhi* is a votive thread bracelet, here put to the mother's own magical rather than its more familiar protective use.