



## ***TAGORE' CHITRA: THE RESILIENT SELF***

*Dr. Kshamata Chaudhary*

*HoD English, School of Humanities & Social Sciences*

*Vardhman Mahaveer Open University, Kota*

*“Literature is the mirror of society”*. It brings before us all the visible and invisible facts of the society. Great writers have given wonderful literature to read and they have presented every character of their writing with so much perfection that the reader would feel the presence of drama, romance, betrayal, humour and almost all other feelings that we go through in life or see around us. Stories or drama are carefully and beautifully crafted based on lives’ of people surrounding us, and it is then just edited here and there without taking of the actual concept or reflection of the story. Without having an overlook on literature, we can’t attain the acknowledgement of all around the world.

An author and writer have the sensibility that makes him enable to feel the happenings which an ordinary man can’t see with so profound sensibility and feelings. Their beauty of writing draws attention of a reader to think and consider about the things which are concerned with them. Over the years throughout the writings social, political, economic and psychological aspects are narrated by the writers. The present century is considered the age of feminism, witnessing emancipated women sharing same platform with men and now writers working on it with profound feminine sensibility. Till today’s women are more expressive in speaking their minds, voicing their needs and problems, and believe in active participation while dealing with adversities. But this emancipation has not come overnight. One can see behind it the efforts of millions of people, ordinary as well as extraordinary figures, to make this happen.

The late nineteenth and twentieth century had brought forth many such intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, and many others who thought of females and worked for their emancipation. Rabindranath Tagore was one who had been the personification of humanism and idealism and responded to the need of liberating women through his writings. Tagore’s rational and humanistic approach to the miserable condition of women in the nineteenth century society made him to give clarion call for their freedom. His writings had been a great support in the Indian Literary Revitalization.



Tagore wrote *Chitrangada* in 1892 and the play was translated into English by the Indian Society of London and published in 1914 as *Chitra*. The late nineteenth century witnessed the Bengali Renaissance with its movements like women's education, widow's remarriage, ban on Sati rituals, and many other social reforms were fast gaining ground. Reshu Shukla is Tagore's *Chitra: An Epitome of Love, Truth and Beauty* states that "*Chitra is the first clear exposition of feminism in India by Tagore*" (Shukla, 149). Tagore was very radical and revolutionary in presenting his women characters with candid explicitness—expressing women's inner desire, getting indulged in romantic affairs outside wedlock as we read in his novel *Ghare Baire* or *Home and the World* (1916). Feminist ideas were a favourite topic of Tagore and they were mentioned in his literary works. His poems like *Marichika*, *Sadharan Meye*, *Narir Ukti*, *Byakto Prem*, *Opekkha* depict feminine notes of different kinds. In these poems Tagore had reflected almost every type of women's emotions, ranging from women empowerment to psychological complications to urge for physical beauty. *Marichika* talks about the need of women's independence and strong mind to overcome difficult situations of sustaining livelihood. In *Sadharan Meye* Tagore's protagonist makes an appeal to the contemporary writer, Saratchandra Chatterjee to write about the common woman and her daily livelihood, enjoying the attention of the elite class of the society. *Narir Ukti* and *Byakto Prem* deal the psychological wants of love and appreciation in a woman, and *Opekkha* describes the need of physical beauty of women. His lyrical drama *Chitra* also deals with the same theme. All of these themes were very significant for the women of his times as well as are still very important in every phase of a modern women's life.

Literature perpetuates human thoughts both in terms of time and space. In India the two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are such enormous reservoir, storehouses of information about the lives and times of ancient India. We must remember that mythological stories are not simple tales; they modify, re-contextualise, evolve different meanings in different ages and reveal more and more dimensions of human consciousness over time.

The sacred epic *Mahabharata* stories represent the issues that are timeless and rendering multi-dimensional interpretations to the artistic adaptation of the tales of Mahabharata and thus providing insights, a wealth of understanding and a reservoir of meaning. When Arjuna won Draupadi and brought her home without realizing that the gift was a girl, asked his mother Kunti to see what he had got in the 'biksha' (begging), the



mother without seeing commanded the five brothers to share it among them. The sons were very obedient and respected the words as declared by their mother. It is obvious from the mythical story that women had been regarded as an object of pleasure who could be shared among the family members. When Draupadi was disrobed she protested, argued but lost her case due to the mass silence of the powerful social crowd including Pitamah Bhisma, Guru Drona and Guru Kripacharya, most learned Mahamantri Vidhur and the heroic legends, the Pandavas. But Draupadi took a vow to destroy the Kurus and paved the path of dignity of women. It is true that mythologies present women as much strong characters. In *Ramayana* too we can clearly interpret Sita as a true monument of patience, perhaps the first Hindu feminist, but a reflexive feminist. She rejects Lord Rama when he doubts her holiness, leaving him deplorable and returns to the gracious lap of Mother Earth.

Rabindranath Tagore's one-act play, *Chitra*, derives its plot from the sacred epic, *Mahabharata*. The Chitrangada episode in the *Mahabharata* is short. Chitrangada was the daughter of Chitravahana, the ruler of Manipur. Since the king did not have a male heir, he brought up his daughter like a son. Once during his wanderings in Manipur Arjuna saw Chitrangada. Fascinated by her personality he wished to marry her. Chitravahana agreed to the proposal on the condition that the son born to Chitrangada would be the ruler of Manipur. Arjuna lived in Manipur for three months and left. Babhravahana was born to them whom Chitrangada bought up as a Pandava prince, inducting in him higher values and great bravery of his father Arjuna.

In *Chitra*, Tagore projects his woman protagonist, Chitra, at the centre. She is the earliest feminist, who voices her wish to establish and express herself. Chitra, the daughter of Chitravahana, the king of Manipur does not let his daughter to grow up with womanly attributes. Chitra, the princess grew up as a boy with very plain looks who wins the love and respect of her subjects by virtue of her manly powers, ensuring their safety and prosperity. "*Women Leaders especially in monarchic systems derive their authority through succession, divine sanction etc., or from attributes of race, class or caste; gender being reduced to a minor consideration in our understanding of politics.*" (Rajan, 104) Chitra's own words shows this,

*"I am Chitra, the daughter of the kingly house of Manipur. With godlike grace Lord Shiva promised to my royal grandsire an*



*unbroken line of male descent. Nevertheless, the divine word  
proved powerless to change the spark of life in my mother's womb -  
so invincible was my nature, woman though I be ".(C-2)*

Chitra is a woman who has received education and training and she possesses liberty. The liberty to go hunting, dress as she chooses, the liberty to make decisions regarding the security and upkeep of her kingdom and the liberty to choose a husband. *"The representation of Chitra... needs to be seen from another angle too. Feminism, we agree by now, does not mean breaking social norms but it stands for creating a social structure where women are free and able to take decision and make choices. The social settings in which the heroines move are conducive to freedom. They roam about freely in the jungle, are fearless, have choices and the society seems to have accepted these norms. Their feminine body does not become a hindrance."*(Bande,52)

As the play opens, we meet Chitra, the daughter of the king of Manipur, as a warrior-princess who is seen in male attire. Is it her own choice to live like a man? No, she is fulfilling her old father's wish who wished to have a son to look after his kingdom but even after many penances made to his god, Lord Shiva, he had been blessed with the girl-child Chitra. Leaving aside her inner feminine self, Chitra for the sake of her father's happiness and content has incarnated a foreign male self with all its masculine qualities— living and speaking like a man, waging wars against the evildoers. It is true that the kingdom and her subjects know her real identity as a woman in male attire but feel safe in her rule. Tagore shows that it is a natural feminine quality which makes a woman forget herself for the happiness of someone else. As she tells Madana, the God of love, *"I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but I have never learnt Cupid's archery, the play of eyes"* (C-3). But as Chitra advances in her youth and she meets Arjuna on the riverbank when she was out for a hunt, her woman self comes forth. Chitra gets enamoured of the handsome Arjuna and becomes desperate to earn his love. This encounter with Arjuna is significant for her as for the first time she senses the presence of woman in her, *"... for the first time in my life I felt myself a woman, and knew that a man was before me"* (4-5). Arjuna does not take notice of her considering her a boy and walks away, leaving Chitra burning in the fire of Cupid. Next day she discards her male appearance and dons a beautiful red gown and bangles and other ornaments and approaches Arjuna to woo him. But unimpressed Arjuna rejects her telling that he is under the vow of twelve years of celibacy.



This rejection becomes too much for her that she approaches the god of love, Madana and the god of eternal youth, Vasanta to help her to win the love of her beloved. In her conversation with the two gods, we could not refrain ourselves from appreciating how Tagore's princess in a very candid tone admits her failure to move Arjuna out of his vows of celibacy:

*Oh, the vows of a man! Surely thou knowest, thou god of love, the unnumbered saints and sages have surrendered the merits of their life-long penance at the feet of a woman. . . O Love, god Love, thou hast laid the vain pride of my manlike strength; and all my man's training lies crushed under thy feet. Now teach me lessons; give me the power of the weak and the weapon of the unarmed hand. (C-7-8)*

Chitra is to be admired for her boldness when she frankly shares her amorous thoughts with Madana and Vasanta, the very quality of a modern woman. Secondly she faces another truth that her looks are very plain to impress any youth which intensifies Chitra's mental agony and makes her desperate to ask the two gods for dazzling physical beauty with heavenly grace. The gods grant her the boon for one year and she succeeds in wooing Arjuna who on seeing her at first sight becomes restless to get her as a love-mate, very ready to forget his great vow of celibacy. His readiness upsets Chitra and she despises him for demeaning the sanctity of his vows:

*Oh, shame upon you! What have you seen in me that makes you false to yourself? Whom do you seek in these dark eyes, in these milk-white arms, if you are ready to pay for her the price of your probity? Not my true self, I know. Surely this cannot be love, this is not man's highest homage to woman! Alas, that this frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the light of the deathless spirit! Yes, now indeed, I know, Arjuna, the fame of your heroic manhood is false. (C-18)*

Chitra cannot tolerate that a great hero like him should fall a prey to something unreal. But later, Chitra and Arjuna come together and spend a year full of youthful bliss. Thus, Chitra wins the battle making her hero to surrender before her feminine self. When she sees Arjuna she fell in love in him, but Chitra is not acknowledged by Arjuna in her male attire, for that she penances to get perfect beauty. Chitra is granted the boon of perfect beauty for one year by the heavenly Gods Madana, the god of Love, and Vasanta, the God of Seasons. Arjuna loves new Chitra who is beautiful and perfect for love. She even discreetly



reveals her identity that she is falsehood, an illusion and a deceit of God, but Arjuna, stricken with love, is ready to forget his vows of celibacy. He is ready to lose himself in the world of dreams rather than to listen Chitra's advice. Chitra becomes sad rather than elated. In the last stage of the play we see Arjuna desires to go back to 'home' and Chitra explicitly stating that such evanescent love as theirs is not meant to be taken home. She is either too self-conscious or too distrustful of the outcome of their love. Chitra tells Arjuna that she is bearing his child in her womb whom she would give birth and bring up as a single parent. If the child turns out to be a male she would teach him the bravely qualities of his father and pass on to him the great values of the Kuru royalty. Tagore concludes his play with the note of victory of womanhood over fickle patriarchy. The avowal to bring up her unborn son as a single parent is significant here. It is indicative of power. Culturally and historically, power is men's prerogative. But when Chitrangada exercises her personal power, she seems to derive it out of an implicit acceptance of her identity. Women's power is often personal and born out of an individual's right to make decision about particular aspects of social life. In Chitrangada's case, there is legitimacy to her actions, not because she is a mythic figure but because Rabindranath Tagore's poetic imagination and psychological insights into the inner workings of the feminine mind are very much down to earth (Bande, 45, 46). Rabindranath Tagore's approach to the mythical story of Chitrangada in Mahabharata is different. Tagore admits in his preface to the first edition of the lyrical drama that his play is indeed inspired by the said episode of the Mahabharata but he has made certain adjustments to suit his thematic concerns. The preface to the play speaks volumes of the real character of the protagonist that Chitra holds in her inner self— a perfect balance between the physical and spiritual aspects of love. She portrays the power of a woman's physical charm as against her strength of character and virtues. Tagore's Chitra stands forth as the equal mate both on mental and spiritual platforms. That is the reason Tagore makes his protagonist speak, "*Would it please your heroic soul if the playmate of the night aspired to be the helpmate of the day, if the left arm learnt to share the burden of the proud right arm*" (C-51)

Tagore's *Chitra* presents his views of feminine power which could not be read in patriarchal connotations, but in its real inner self-giving woman her sense of identity and personal worth. When Tagore's Chitra reveals her identity at the end of the play, "I am Chitra", she shows herself as a poised, mature woman. Chitra's reaching to this maturity is a result of her a year long journey which she spends with Arjuna as a love-mate.



Tagore's feminist Chitra starts to show her up as the year approaches its end. She realizes that it is her "borrowed beauty" that has fascinated Arjuna and made him to choose her as his enamour. She starts feeling uneasy with this fact. Tagore has also depicted the male psyche in its true colour. When Arjuna meets Chitra he sides his heroic senses and becomes desperate to possess the angelic beauty. But within a year he becomes tired of living an idle life. Now his rational mind ponders on the fact that he did not know anything about his beloved. Along with this he hears from the villagers about the valorous princess Chitra who always comes to rescue them from evildoers. He praises her because "*in valour she is a man, and a woman in tenderness*" (C-48). When he admits her name before the disguised Chitra she enjoys his anxiety and calls the woman in question "*the unfortunate creature*" because "*beauty is denied her*" and she is "*like the spirit of a cheerless morning, sitting upon the stony mountain peak, all her light blotted out by dark clouds*" (C-48).

At this juncture of the play what catches our attention is the mental conflict Chitra is going through. Chitra, a young lady, falls in love with a hero who rejects her for her plain looks and she gets hurt. But she is not like any other woman as she asserts herself in Scene I, "*I am not the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence feeding it with nightly tears and covering it with the daily patient smile, a widow from her birth. The flower of my desire shall never drop into the dust before it has ripened to fruit*" (C-9). When we read these lines and analyse with feminist approach, we find that she knows she can open the chaste doors of Arjuna's heart and make an eternal place there. But she has no time and she cannot wait, "*But it is the labour of a lifetime to make one's true self known and honoured*" (C-9). Therefore with "borrowed beauty" she wins him over and feels ecstatic, enjoying 'life to the lees'. Here Tagore shows Chitra asserting her sexuality and enjoying life with voluptuous sensuality but still sadness lurking side by side. The playwright's this shift from ethical values to physicality, from spirituality to treasuring in transient desires of life. Jasbir Jain studies such mythical cases and rightly remarks in her book, *Writing Women Across Cultures* (2002)

*Interestingly enough, myths unconsciously project women as strong characters. Gods and men are presented open to temptation and in need of protection and support. They succumb to their circumstances, while women rooted in nature display the ability to stand alone and by themselves. When men fall the blame is thrown on others; when women fall they*



*have only themselves to blame! They are called upon to develop their own resources (Jain.19).*

Chitra's ecstasy on winning man of her dreams eventually reduces into guilt and she starts seeing her "borrowed beauty" as her rival because Arjuna does not love her real self but her shadow. She calls her beauty a "cursed appearance" which "*companions me like a demon robbing me of all the prizes of love- all the kisses for which my heart is athirst*" (C-26). She admits her guilt when every day she goes to Arjuna, "*It is my hateful task to deck her [Chitra's body] every day, to send her to my beloved and see her caressed by him*" (C-27). A realisation of her self-worth dawns on her as she admits, "*I will reveal my true self to him, a nobler thing than this disguise. If he rejects it, if he spurns me and breaks my heart, I will bear even that in silence*" (C-27-28). She believes that it is not worthwhile to live in deceit.

Tagore makes her protagonist to disguise her real self twice— firstly when we see her in male attire, playing part of a valorous warrior, and second when she emergences on her the heavenly beauty and grace to entice Arjuna's heart. Both disguises are important as in the first case she discovers a woman's heart in her manly attired body and in the second one, she discovers her actual self, her real worth. Chitra's mental conflict helps her to re-define herself, her womanhood that makes her such a desirable figure not only to Arjuna but also to the readers. Tagore's sensible approach to his protagonist is very significant. His dramatic art weaves an altogether different portrait— a girl of his time treading the road of modern India. Dr. Usha Bande in *Tagore's Chitra and Folklore's Hidimba: Power of the Feminine* rightly remarks, "*Chitra becomes that metaphor, a metaphor for the esoteric in woman that underlines her power—power to hold, to let go, and yet to bind*" (Bande-52). Arjuna, the very masculine heroic legend, proves himself to be a ready prey. Dr. Bande observes, "he looks pale as against her brilliance and Tagore brings forth the ultimate woman— delicately feminine and fiercely feminist, a female who recognizes her strength, takes on the responsibility for the 'self' to emerge as the 'female hero'".

Towards the end when Chitra reveals her true identity to Arjuna that she is that warrior-princess whom he admires and wants to meet, Arjuna becomes pleasantly surprised. Chitra's proud assertion "*I am Chitra*" is very intense as it intensifies the dramatic appeal of the major theme of the play— the transient nature of beauty and the eternal inner strength of character: "*I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to*





*be brushed aside like a moth with indifference” (C-57).* This self-acclamation is very significant as it echo about the true Chitra, not the princess, not the beautiful mademoiselle, nor the plain girl, but a woman who refuses to be forcefully tailored into epitomes of womanhood. Chitra represents womanhood not as an object of pleasure nor a paragon of virtues to be looked up to, but expects men to treat their female counterparts as equals, to accept them as they are and pass on their respective recognition.

In the last section of the play, Chitra discloses another truth that she is bearing Arjuna’s child in her womb and Arjuna is free from every duty relating to her and their future child and could go back home. She assures Arjuna, *“If your babe, whom I am nourishing in my womb be born a son, I shall myself teach him to be a second Arjuna, and send him to you when the time comes, and then at last you will truly know me” (C-57).* Chitra’s avowal of bringing up of their son as a single parent is very significant as it is indicative of power and self-sufficiency. Since ages we have seen power is man’s prerogative and women are restricted to take any decision even regarding their own lives. When she is young her father decides for her, after marriage her husband rules her fate and when she is old and a widow her son sets her destiny. Throughout a woman’s life, power stays in the hands of the patriarchy. But Chitra exercises her personal power which she seems to derive it out of her acceptance of her identity as an independent entity, virtuous and strong. Here Tagore justifies the role of woman, not only as a beautiful and benevolent agent of Mother Nature but also as an interpreter of truth. Arjuna realises these facts which makes him say, *“Beloved, my life is full” (C-58).*

Critics see the evolution of plain-looking, manly-attired warrior princess Chitra to a more mature, self-assuring confident Chitra in the three segments that Ellen Showalter has given—feminine, feminist and female. Feminism is the period of imitation, of submission; feminist is that of anger and the search for new paradigms and the female stage is the one of recognition of strength as a woman. Tagore’s envisioning of Chitra is what the modern woman strives to be, with the access to freedom and equal opportunity that men possess, independent, endowed with the power and liberty to think and make and with awareness of her sexuality and attractiveness. The modern woman is multifaceted; she is well educated, trained and qualified. She is strong enough to multitask, smart enough to climb the ladder of success, graceful but competitive, emotional and affectionate, persevering to be beautiful and



recognized and above all, is self assertive. Chitra is the forerunner of this forward race. “The Mahabharata stories of Chitrangada, the folk and literary versions can help us evaluate our stand on feminism– the frank expression of the urge of the body, single parenthood, acceptance of girl child/woman as a ruler and the ability of the female to know where to draw the line. On close reading the stories reveal a beautiful balance of the female and feminine (Bande 52,53). Thus, Chitra is an iconic representation of the modern woman by Tagore.

While reading the interpretation noted by Dr. Bande we observe that Chitra as the boyish entity is in the stage of imitation followed by her surrender to Arjuna; she is feminist in her anger against her disguise and the female self when she recognizes her female power. She asserts that Tagore’s views about women have been bold and radical. He has presented his heroines as true feminists, expressive and emotive. Feminism never means breaking social norms but it stands for creating a social structure where women like men are free and given right to take decision and make choices. (Bande 51) Chitra as true Tagore girl is fearless and makes her choice to live free and rear her child as a single parent. It is her feminist spirit that help her to complete her ‘quest’ for real identity — first frank expression of the physical urge, single parenthood, woman as a ruler and the ability of the female to know where to draw the line. Different facets of known person give us wide scope to judge her for her deed. Through her character, dialogues and silences, Tagore’s Chitra plays the role of a preserver of her identity and consoler of emotions.

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