

RE-EVALUATING FEMINISM: A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT OF *CHITRA* BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Rabindranath Tagore's Chitra through a feminist lens, arguing that while Tagore is often heralded as a progressive thinker and advocate for women's empowerment, the portrayal of Chitra in the play contradicts fundamental feminist ideals. By exploring the narrative's gender dynamics, the protagonist's transformation, and her ultimate submission to patriarchal norms, this paper demonstrates how Chitra fails feminism by reinforcing the objectification and subjugation of women. Using theories from Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, and postcolonial feminist criticism, this study challenges the perception of Chitra as a feminist text and highlights the need for a more critical engagement with its themes.

Keywords: *Feminism, Patriarchy, Rabindranath Tagore, Chitra, Gender Roles, Simone de Beauvoir, Postcolonial Feminism, Objectification, Empowerment, Identity.*

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Why should you not let woman empowered be
With right to conquer her own destiny,
O Lord? 275 (woman empowered)

There is no doubt about the fact that Rabindranath Tagore was a social reformer having progressive views about women. If we peruse through the literature he produced, we can distinctly perceive, often if not always, an empowered and emancipated woman as the protagonist, be it Bimla of *Ghare Baire*, Binodini of *Chokher Bali*, Labanya of *Shesher Kobita*, Charulata of *Nashtanirh*, and so many more. An article published in *The Indian Express* states that "He strongly believed in fighting for women's upliftment using his pen as a weapon. Focusing largely on emancipation, his writing campaigned for women's liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power and dignity and rights." (Tagore and his women: Works that conveyed feminism very strongly, May 7, 2017)

Going through the oeuvre of any writer, we can discern different phases of evolution of the writer. The same stands true for Tagore. What is phenomenal about him is that he is one writer who is

considered advocating the individuality of a woman by portraying such women characters in his works who, though are set up in traditional roles, but are strong females and women of action and that too at a time in history when not much thought was given to the idea of the upliftment of the women of the society, much before the advent of the western feminism. Chronologically speaking, Tagore's writings can be sort of loosely sectionalized in three stages having merging borders as per the portrayal of women characters, the thoughtful, the active and the revolting phase. The first stage is of being thoughtful over the issues of women and by taking up mythical characters he sends out messages that women should not bow down even if they face suppression or rejection. The second stage is of portrayal of women who are educated Bengali women and who actively speak of their individuality and the third is the one in which these educated city women speak out not only for their rights but also of the other social evils prevalent in the society.

Tagore's corpus has many shades and hues but today I would be dealing with a one act play written by him by the title *Chitra*. This paper proposes to analyse that even though Tagore was a feminist and a social reformer working towards the upliftment of the women, somehow, he failed feminism in the portrayal of the character of *Chitra* in the eponymous play. *Chitra*, the play, is inspired by *Mahabharata* and is based on the story of Chitrangada, the warrior Princess and the daughter of Chitravahana, the king of Manipur. Not much criticism is available on this play but whatever is there, considers *Chitra* as a feministic play, celebrating Tagore's progressive and bold views about and for women and once again establishing him as a feminist. An article published in *New York Times*, published on March 22, 1914, was titled thus about *Chitra* "TAGORE'S IDEAL WOMAN; Famous Indian Poet's One-Act Play in Which, Under the Guise of an Old Hindu Legend, He Touches Modern Feminism". The article states that "We did not look for an Oriental, even though a seer, to write a book (especially twenty-five years ago, when this was written) that might serve as evangel to the most advanced among modern Occidental women—Yet this is just what Rabindranath Tagore has done."

Chitra is the story of the princess of Manipur who was brought up by her father as a boy. This also has an interesting story behind it. One of her father's ancestors was blessed by Lord Shiva by granting a boon of the birth of an only male child to him and his descendants but somehow this trend was broken by the birth of Chitra and since she was the only child, her father brought her up as a son. She is unattractive and masculine in body. One day, dressed in a boyish attire, she happens to meet Arjuna, who is on exile, and falls in love with him. She changes her dress into that of a woman's and goes to Arjuna professing her love for him. Arjuna rejects her saying that he is under vow of celibacy. Terribly hurt, Chitra requests Gods Madana, god of love and Vasanta, god of spring, to give her eternal beauty for a day so that she could woo Arjuna. Her wish is granted but for a year and she is transformed into a heavenly beauty. Arjuna gets enamoured by her and they start living together. Towards the end of the year, Arjuna comes to know of the heroism of the princess Chitra and he yearns to meet her. Chitra then comes back to her original self and the play ends with the utterance of satisfaction by Arjuna. On the surface it appears to be story of a woman who does not hesitate in professing her love, of a woman who is strongly built and is an unmatched warrior, of a woman who is empowered and emancipated but when reading between the lines, it is otherwise.

We all know that Feminism broadly constitutes a revolt against all that is patriarchal. If we talk of Simone De Beauvoir, she clearly states that woman has been the 'other' of the man, woman is the object to the subject man. The subject needs an object to define it and in the same way the man needs a woman to define him. As Rathi puts it "Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated."

The woman occupies a second place in every sphere and waits upon the man for rejection and acceptance. The same happens with Chitra in the play. She falls in love with Arjuna but since she is dressed as a boy, Arjuna does not pay attention to her, so she adorns rich clothes and jewellery, an act she had never done and her shame is felt in the following lines "The unaccustomed dress clung about my shrinking shame; but I hastened on my quest.", to woo Arjuna. But she is rejected in her advances by Arjuna and she says "Shame fell on me like a thunderbolt,....His last words as I walked home pricked my ears like red hot needles."(6) Her hurt is clearly discernible here. "As far as the brain is concerned, a broken heart may not be so different from a broken arm" says Kirsten Weir in an article published by American Psychological Association. She further states that "Rejection also has serious implications for an individual's psychological state and for society in general."

This statement of hers has been endorsed by Beverly D Flaxington in her article in *Psychology Today* where she states that "Pain is not the only negative consequence of rejection; it can also lead us to feel more insecure in ourselves, our decisions, and our choices."

This is what happens in Chitra's case. She is not able to handle this rejection, affecting her sane decision-making power and she comes to the Gods to beg for beauty to attract Arjuna to her self. She herself tries to become a commodity, an object, for the consumption of Arjuna. She requests the Gods to "...take from my young body this primal injustice, an unattractive plainness." (9). In the same tune she at another instance says "I hated my strong, lithe arm, scored by drawing the bowstring."(7) It is so much in contrast to what Sojourner Truth says about her body in her speech "Ain't I a Woman? "I have as much muscle as any man and can do as much work as any man." We can feel her pride in saying so.

Chitra shows her vulnerability in feeling ashamed of her body and thus shatters her self-respect and individuality. She is granted beauty by the Gods and then she approaches Arjuna, who earlier had rejected her saying he was under a vow of celibacy, now kneels in front of her, begging to be accepted. When Chitra asks him about his vow of celibacy, he replies "But you have dissolved my vow even as the moon dissolves the night's vow of obscurity."(16) For a moment Chitra shows her authority but that is only for a fleeting moment. She is fully aware that Arjuna is not in love with her true-self but still for her Arjuna has a great heart and he still is her hero. She says to Arjuna "Alas, it is not I, not I Arjuna! It is the deceit of a god. Go, go, My hero, go. Woo not falsehood, offer not your great heart to an illusion. Go."(17) And then she succumbs to Arjuna's pressure even though it means demeaning herself. Chitra is not happy in her inner-self with this transformation and feels deceitful. She says to the Gods "But when I woke in the morning from

my dream I found that my body had become my own rival. It is my hateful task to deck her every day, to send her to my beloved and see her caressed by him.” (24)

It would be appropriate here to quote Mary Wollstonecraft from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* “To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say, that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the MODEST slaves of opinion.”

For the love of Arjuna, Chitra, a princess, wishes and is ready to be a slave to him. No one else but she puts herself in a subaltern position. When warned by the Gods about her being disdainfully rejected by Arjuna if she goes to him in her true-self, she says that she would silently bear even that if it happens thus. This is not the true self of a warrior-princess who has been brought up like a man, having a powerful body and soul. She consciously puts herself in the ‘other’ place while putting Arjuna on an ‘absolute’ altar. After few days of sensual pleasure, Arjuna becomes a more dominant male by questioning the identity of Chitra, asking her about her home and from where she comes. To this Chitra replies “Why these questions? Are the hours of unthinking pleasure over?” (32). And she knows the truth because Arjuna’s mind starts wandering and thus she says “...the year is not yet full, and you are tired already! ... Could this body of mine have drooped and died with the flowers of last spring it surely would have died with honour.”(34) These lines indicate that she is well aware that her honour is at stake but she is hesitant in coming out of the position of the ‘other’ and acquire the dominant position. Arjuna, on hearing about Princess Chitra gets very curious to know her and asks the transformed Chitra about the Princess. The speech of Chitra towards the end of the play is full of self-pity and demeaning for a woman. She says of herself “...beauty is denied her. She is like the spirit of a cheerless morning, sitting upon the stony mountain peak, all her light blotted out by dark clouds. Do not ask me of her life. It will never sound sweet to man’s ear.” She still wants to remain in a subservient position connoting that her life had no meaning except to be a pleasure-source to a man. Even at the end of the play she comes in her true self because it is the end of the year of beauty granted to her and she finds it unbearable to leave Arjuna. It is not her strong will that she bares all, but it is Arjuna’s too much inquisitiveness about the princess Chitra that prompts her to take a chance as her true self. Though she calls herself not an object of common pity, yet she behaves one throughout the play. She has, from the beginning to the end, accepted her manipulation at the hands of first, her father, then the male Gods Madan and Vasant and ultimately Arjuna. She dresses as a male and lives the life of a Prince for her father, the Gods, though transform her into a beauty but when she asks them for a day of beauty, they grant her a year and when she finds her beautiful body a rival to herself, they influence her in not giving it up till the year ends. But she faces manipulation at the hands of Arjuna, the most. Even if at the end she reveals her true-self, that is also to please Arjuna. She introduces her self not just as Chitra or Princess Chitra but “...Chitra, the daughter of a king” signifying that her identity is only either as a daughter or as a beloved.

What best a quote than Mary Wollstonecraft’s to sum up who says in her *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* that “For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than

utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience.” Tagore’s oft-quoted line “where the mind is without fear and the head is held high” though has a deep meaning but some how he seems to have defied this philosophy in portraying the character of Chitra.

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