

## TAGORE'S *CHITRA*: A FEMINIST STUDY

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### Abstract

Tagore can be studied by many facets and dimensions like his myths, legends, etc. The heroines from his short stories are studied by various research scholars. In the present study the scholar will study his dramatic heroine Chitra from a feminist perspective. For this a brief survey of major feminist thoughts is necessary.

**Keywords:** Feminsim, Chitra, Tagore, drama, androgyne, amazon

Rabindranath Tagore wrote over sixty dramas. His range varies from profound tragedies, tragi-comedies, symbolical dramas, allegories, dramas dealing with contemporary social and political problems, dramatic dialogues in verse, lyrical dramas, musical dramas, dance dramas to warm-hearted comedies and satire.

In pre-independent India Tagore was the only playwright who wrote plays with women occupying the central role in his plays. His plays revolve round the needs, interests, abilities, dignity and freedom of the female characters. Many of his plays like *Chitra*, *Chandalika*, *Malini*, *Shyama*, *Nalini* are entitled after the names of the heroines of the plays. They are lively and full of energy. Tagore was the first Indian writer who brought the woman out of the kitchen into the parlour. He challenged the traditional concept of woman. He feels that women have an undeniable presence in society. He portrays unconventional women. Tagore inherited the great literary tradition of Bengal which regarded women as a primordial energy of the universe. There are mythical, historical, social, realistic and romantic women characters placed in several of his dramas. He penetrates deep into their hearts with his keen psychological insight. He seems to be a feminist before the word feminism was in vogue.

Feminism in West arose as a reaction against inhuman condition of women. Motherhood and homemaking were never considered as significant activities. It was believed that women live in an inert and passive world of their own. Men never recorded in history the contributions made by women and their sufferings. Whatever traces of feminine history are found cannot be relied upon as they are recorded by men and are based on their perspective. The history of feminism is conjoined with the history of feminist movement. The feminist movement in west started with the publication of *A Vindication of The Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft. She belongs to the Liberal feminist tradition. Other feminists who belong to this tradition are John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. They believed that all social categories are structured by the fact of gender. They confirmed that 'femininity' is a prison and not a quality of healthy femaleness. Wollstonecraft argued that femininity is a condition similar to slavery. She says that the term 'human nature' seems to obliterate the social/biological difference between men and women but

in fact it marginalizes female experience by characterizing men and women of quite different and conflicting ‘natures’. According to her the liberal notion of reason did not extend to women and female nature is assumed irrational. Wollstonecraft refuted this claim of liberalism and asserted that women too possessed the innate capacity for reason. Women should be granted equal citizenship. She argues that in order to enhance women’s capacity for rational thought education should be provided to them in which they lack. In a *Vindication of the Rights of Women* she asserts:

Women are everywhere in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them, and they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is women’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour. (Whelehan 30)

The struggle of women’s rights gained momentum in 1945. A number of books appeared highlighting the cultural and literary implications of feminism. *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir was one such book which was in radical critical mode. In this book Beauvoir argued that society sets up the male as a positive norm and female as the negative, second or ‘other’. This concept is in analogy with Woolf’s notion of ‘women as mirror’. The book presents “all the anthropological, philosophical, sociological and psychological evidence of the dependence and ‘otherness’ of women” (12)

*The Second Sex* describes the ways in which the European literary, social, political, religious traditions have created an ideology of women’s “natural” inferiority. Its purpose was to justify patriarchal dominations. Beauvoir argues for sexual equality. She exposes the ways in which patriarchy exploits the sexual difference. The patriarchy then creates a system of inequality. She stresses that so long as the standard of equality is the male body, the discriminatory sexual difference will remain. Beauvoir argues that although there is sexual difference between men and women still women are equal to men. She finds it unjust and inhuman to use the sexual difference to oppress women. She challenges the male assumption that a woman is the weaker sex. Her famous line “One is not born but becomes a woman” has generated a debate on sex-gender distinction. She has analysed the social constructions of femininity. She used phenomenology as a tool for declaring patriarchy as oppressive. Sex affected adversely the lived body experience of females. The body of females are as capable of doing any work as that of males. But patriarchal structure deprives women of their “can do” bodies by declaring them weak. She initiated the consciousness- raising movement that characterized second wave feminism. *The Second Sex* brought forth the injustices faced by women and it also inspired them to take up the cause of their liberation.

The present research study will focus on how Tagore has presented new woman in his mythical plays *Chitra* and *The Mother’s Prayer*. The study is relevant to the modern social change. Tagore’s heroines are beautiful and intelligent. Tagore’s *Chitra* is completely different from the *Chitra* of Mahabharata. In Mahabharata Arjuna asks *Chitra*’s father for *Chitra*’s hand in marriage whereas Tagore’s *Chitra* asks Arjuna to be her husband.

Tagore inducted new woman into his plays and gave her the central role. In his drama women outgrew their object-like status and became the real subject. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

dealt with the theme of woman's emancipation but not with such intensity. Tagore has created protagonists like Chitra, Chandalika, Nandini, Shrimati, Sumitra etc. who defy conventions blatantly to rise to unprecedented heights. Tagore has infused feminist consciousness in his heroines. Tagore has portrayed his heroines as super heroines challenging the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex.

Chitra is brought up as a son. She has no trace of femininity in her. She is an expert in riding, hunting and war. She defends her people from outside intrusions. She is loved by her people. She performs all the duties that a king performs. She wears men's attire. She tells the God of love - Madana - that she knows "no feminine wiles for winning hearts" (3). She would rove alone in the forest in search of a game. The sight of Arjuna kindles in her a feminine consciousness. She confesses before Madana that "for the first time in my life I felt myself a woman, and knew that a man was before me" (4-5).

Tagore's heroines are active instead of passive. Chitra, Chandalika, Srimati all are active as against their male counterparts. They strive hard to get their goal. Besides this Tagore sounds similar to Simone de Beauvoir. She has written in *The Second Sex* that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295).

Chitra is not born as a woman. She has no trace of womanhood in her before she met Arjuna. Instead Chitra is daring. She challenges Arjuna in single combat. When Arjuna rejects her she does not weep like a woman. She boldly asserts that she is "not the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence, feeding it with nightly tears" (9). She makes up her mind to win Arjuna's love. Her feminist mind-set is bent on taking revenge for this humiliation. Tagore has delineated her in contrast to Ibsen's Nora, the heroine of *A Doll's House*. Nora leaves her husband's home as a rebel, but Chitra demands equality with Arjuna. She urges the god to grant her beauty: "for a single day make me superbly beautiful, as beautiful as was the sudden awakening of love in my heart. Give me but one day of perfect beauty, and I will answer for the days that follow" (Kripalani 76).

Chitra is the first exposition of feminism in India. Chitra had dreamt of defeating Arjuna, long before she actually met him. She confessed to Madana that "Many a day my young ambition had spurred me on to break my lance with him, to challenge him in disguise to single combat, and prove my skill in arms against him" (5).

Her son like upbringing has made her hard and strong. She told to Madana that even shame could not break her to pieces because "so utterly hard, so like a man am I" (7). She is an "androgynous" as introduced by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. Tagore has not confined Chitra in the prison of gender. Woolf suggested that while bodies are divided into two sexes, minds contain both, although "in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man" (97).

It may appear that Tagore has used the 'Amazon' myth to portray Chitra. Amazon means a "Female warrior" and a "very strong, tall, or masculine woman." These Amazons were fighters who would succumb to their male opponents either through death or matrimony. Chitra also possesses strong arms and she expresses her hatred for them when Arjuna denies being her husband. She says that she "hated my strong, lithe arm, scored by drawing the bow-string" (7). Tagore appealed to woman for their own emancipation. Women must be aware of their freedom and rights. They must create a niche for themselves in this male dominated world. In his essay "Women", Tagore writes that "the time has come when women's responsibility has become greater than ever before, when her field of work has far transcended the domestic sphere of life" (43).

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