

Rabindranath Tagore's Chitra: A Study on the Manifestation of Indian-ness

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Abstract

The play *Chitra* by Rabindranath Tagore is based on the myth of Chitrangada from the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about 'dharma' (Hindu moral law) and a 'history'. And Tagore's retelling of a lesser known myth of Chitrangada from the great epic Mahabharata is a manifestation of Indian-ness. For a reader of Indian origin, the reading of the play *Chitra* will facilitate in understanding the myth and the great epic. And for a reader of foreign origin it will be an opportunity to get to know something new - about Indian culture and also about the great epic of India at large.

Keywords: myth, love, manifestation, reform, Indianness,

Chitra is a one-act play by Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an Indian polymath - poet, writer, playwright, song composer, philosopher, social reformer and painter. He reshaped Bengali literature and music, as well as Indian art with 'contextual modernism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He introduced new prose and verse forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, thereby liberating it from traditional models based on classical Sanskrit. He was highly influential in introducing Indian culture to the west and vice-versa, and he is generally regarded as the outstanding creative artist of early twentieth-century India. In 1913 he became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Tagore was awarded a knighthood in 1915, but he repudiated it in 1919 as a protest against the Amritsar Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. In India, he is known by the respectful nickname of 'Gurudev'. Tagore was introduced to the western world by W.B. Yeats, who helped him publish *Gitanjali* in English which earned him immense fame in the west.

Rabindranath Tagore was primarily a poet and has published several collections of poems; notable are *Manasi* (1890), *Sonar Tari* (1894; *The Golden Boat*) and *Gitanjali* (1910). He has also written novels and novellas; among them are *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare-Baire* (1916). His notable plays are *Chitrangada* (1892; *Chitra* 1913), *Raja* or

The King of the Dark Chamber (1910), and *Dakghar* or *The Post Office* (1912). Tagore was a prolific composer of songs with around two thousand two hundred and thirty songs to his credit popularly known as *rabindrasangit*.

The play *Chitrangada* and first published in English as *Chitra* in 1913 by the Indian society of London, is a lyrical play and is based on the myth of Chitrangada from the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is an ancient Sanskrit epic by Vyasa. It is a narrative on the war between the two branches of a family - the Pandavas and Kauravas - for the throne of Hastinapur. Interwoven into this narrative are many short stories about people dead or alive, and also there are philosophical discourses. The narrative has a myth of Chitrangada, a warrior princess of Manipur and the only heir to king Chitravahana. Since Chitravahana did not have any other heir, he trains Chitrangada in warfare and rule of the kingdom. Chitrangada became well versed in warfare and acquired all the skills to protect the people of her land. She is one of the Pandav prince Arjun's consorts. Chitrangada bears a son named Babhravahana with him. This myth of Chitrangada is adapted by Rabindranath Tagore in his play *Chitra*.

The myth of Chitrangada in the Mahabharata tale goes thus. Arjuna is wandering to fulfil the vow of penance. In the course of his wanderings he comes to Manipur. There he sees Chitrangada, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the king of Manipur. Arjuna is obsessed with the charms of Chitrangada and asks the king for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Chitravahana agrees to give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna on a condition that a son born of their marriage should be given to him; as Chitrangada was his only child and he needed an heir to rule Manipur. Arjuna agrees to the condition and marries Chitrangada. He stays with Chitrangada in Manipur for three years and when a son is born he leaves the palace and continues with his wanderings.

Tagore has given an amazing twist to the Mahabharata tale of Chitrangada in his play to give dramatic effect. Tagore's play *Chitrangada* in Bengali and translated into English as *Chitra* has four characters - Madana, Vasanta,

Chitra and Arjuna. The play opens with Chitra requesting the Gods Madana and Vasanta to grant her absolute beauty to vow Arjuna. In Hindu mythology Madana is the God of love; and Vasanta is the God of spring season and is companion to the God of the love, Madana. Chitra introduces herself to them as the daughter of the king of the Manipur. She further tells them that Lord Shiva had blessed her forbears to have an unbroken line of male heir in their family to rule the kingdom. But the divine words proved powerless and Chitra was born to her father, Chitravahna. Therefore, Chitravahana trained her to follow all the duties of a king. One day she goes to the forest all alone for hunting. There she happens to meet Arjuna. Chitra has heard about Arjuna as a great warrior and a member of Kuru clan and looking at his sturdy figure she immediately fell in love with him and desired for him. Arjuna has taken a vow of celibacy for twelve long years and therefore he is wandering in the forests and happens to be in the forest near Manipur.

Chitra is dressed in a man's cloth therefore Arjuna could not consider her a woman. The following day Chitra dresses like a woman and tries to impress Arjuna. But this too did not lay any effect on Arjuna. Chitra knew no feminine wiles for winning heart of a man; even her hands were strong to bend the bows. Arjuna again did not pay any heed to her on the pretext of the vow of celibacy taken by him. This disheartened Chitra. She requests Madana and Vasanta Gods to bless her with perfect beauty and take away her unattractive plainness for a day so that she can win heart of Arjuna. God Madana granted her the wish not for a day but for a year.

In the Scene II of the play Arjuna falls in love looking at the perfect beauty of Chitra and desires for her. Chitra reminds her of the vow of celibacy that he has taken, but Arjuna is ready to break the vow. Chitra even warns him that his beauty is an illusion and that he should not woo falsehood. In spite of these utterances of Chitra, Arjuna could not control his desire and he unites with Chitra in love. Though Chitra desired for the love of Arjuna, but is not satisfied of this communion with Arjuna. For her Arjuna is attracted to her falsehood of borrowed beauty. Chitra visits Gods Madana and Vasanta and narrates them the misery of her love with Arjuna. For Chitra her own body becomes a rival of her. She is even ready to reveal her true self to Arjuna without taking into consideration the consequences of it. The Gods advice her not to do so and to return to Arjuna; and wait for the year to pass. They even suggest her that a time will come when Arjuna will gladly accept the true self of Chitra.

Then later in the ensuing Scene of the play Arjuna

expresses before Chitra to take her to his palace after the period of his exile is over and to which Chitra denies. Arjuna even wishes to know of the family and background of Chitra as she was living with him in the forest for so many days. Chitra remarks that she has no past and that she is as transient as a drop of dew, this upsets Arjuna. Chitra, in turn questions Arjuna if his pleasures in her are over. Arjuna even expresses his fear of losing her and his lack of peace of mind that he experiences when he is with Chitra. Arjuna desires for a long lasting relationship, a relationship which is not merely based on sensual pleasures but a relationship which is a peaceful security of love and this security of love is missing for Arjuna in his love with Chitra.

Around the same time Arjuna happens to hear stories of Chitra, the warrior princess of Manipur. In the Scene VIII the villagers of Manipur tell Arjuna about their princess and how she had always protected them from the enemies. For them she was the terror of all evil doers; and that in her presence the villagers' only feared natural death and nothing else. Some villagers inform Arjuna that their village is attacked by robbers from the northern hills and feared the attack as their princess has gone on a pilgrimage and they do not know where to find her. Here Arjuna's mind is filled with the thoughts of Chitra and he wonders what kind of woman Chitra might be. Chitra now cannot control herself and besides the year of her blessed beauty was about to be over. She tells Arjuna that the warrior princess has manly built up and is not as beautiful as she is. Also Arjuna now insists to know the true self of Chitra. Chitra reveals her identity to Arjuna thus;

I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self. 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 when Arjuna comes to know the true self of Chitra he feels his life is complete with her. With this note the play ends. Thus Arjuna loves Chitra for who she is and not for what she pretends to be. Tagore's representation of human love in Chitra is beautiful. In the play love finds its attainment when the mind and heart of both Arjuna and Chitra is in synchronicity.

The Mahabharata is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about 'dharma' (Hindu moral law) and a 'history'. And Tagore's

retelling of a lesser known myth of Chitrangada from the great epic Mahabharata is a manifestation of Indian-ness. Indian-ness is about many things; it is about Indian tradition, culture, and civilization; it is about the way the Indians live, behave and think; it is also about the best of the religion of the people of India. For a reader of Indian origin, the reading of the play Chitra will facilitate in understanding the myth and the great epic. And for a reader of foreign origin it will be an opportunity to get to know something new - about Indian culture and also about the great epic of India at large. To note the views of Sudhir Kakar,

Some of the key building blocks of Indian-ness or Indian identity are: an ideology around personal and especially family relationships that derives from the institution of joint family, . . . a cultural imagination teeming with shared myths and legends, especially from the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, . . . (Kakar)

Kakar further adds, "Indian-ness is a composite portrait, which enables Indians to recognize themselves and be recognized by others".

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