

FROM DILEMMA TO CLARITY: GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS LEADING TO GENDER EQUALITY IN TAGORE'S PLAY 'CHITRA'

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's very popular play 'Chitra' based on the mythological story from Mahabharata offers various interpretations. The Story of Princess Chitrangada's spirited pursuit of love, her quest for beauty and the sense of emptiness and defeat which she feels even after winning Arjuna's love can be studied from different perspectives, the most striking of them is Gender perspective.

Hence an effort has been made in the present research paper to analyse and interpret how gender issues are resolved through self realisation to attain gender equality in the end by both the characters: Chitra and Arjuna.

Keywords: gender consciousness, gender equality, Tagore, play, chitra, Arjuna

Introduction:

Indian mythology is an inseparable part of Indian culture. It has not only enriched Indian culture but also made it unique in the world with its astonishing range of stories which not only reveal a plethora of human emotions and complex relationships but also teach the value of being moral and ethical as a human being.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's enthralling play 'Chitra' is based on one such mythological love story from Mahabharata; the story of Princess of Manipur 'Chitrangada' and Arjuna-the most valiant of the Pandavas.

Chitra the main character of the story was brought up as a boy despite being a girl at her father's insistence. She was deprived of leading a normal life of a girl. Yet the feminine feelings surface in her heart when she meets Arjuna and it sets the stage for further drama to unfold with all its intriguing elements. The events which follow could be well interpreted from the perspective of gender consciousness and gender equality.

Chitra's lack of gender consciousness and the realisation of femininity:

Gender consciousness is the state of being aware of the traditional ideas about gender. For example women should be delicate, docile, meek and submissive and her entire world should revolve

around the home and hearth; whereas man should be strong, brave, dominant and a fighter in the battlefield of life.

Chitra in the beginning lacks this gender consciousness, as she was brought up as a son by her father - the king of Manipur. He was greatly disappointed by the birth of a girl and to compensate for the loss he trained her just like a male. She became an expert in riding, hunting and fighting. She dressed up like a man and became quite masculine physically. She was happily unaware of the hidden femininity buried deep down her manly attire and masculine frame. She realises the outburst of feminine feelings hidden so far when she meets Arjuna - an embodiment of manhood.

That was the first moment when she became conscious of her feminine gender.

She explains her state of mind to Madana, the God of love: "Then for the first time in my life I felt myself a woman and knew that a man was before me." (*Glimpses of English: Chitra, 74*)

Her sudden gender consciousness makes her lament the lack of feminine beauty as she fails to attract Arjuna. She confides in Madana: "I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong enough to bend a bow, but I have never learnt Cupid's archery, the play of eyes." (*Chitra, 74*)

To win Arjuna's heart she changes her attire. Bedecked with jewelry and wearing a silk gown she proposes Arjuna. But alas! She realises that she is not woman enough to attract him. So she prays to Madana- the God of love and Vasanta- the king of seasons and eternal youth to grant a 'brief day of perfect beauty'

In turn her prayer was granted and she was given 'a whole year of charm and perfect beauty.' What follows afterwards is an intense and passionate love-life of Chitra and Arjuna in the forest. Thus, it could well be said that however one tries to suppress it, the gender- specific feelings do surface at the opportune time, making one conscious of one's gender. Madana- the God of love rightly explains-

"At the auspicious hour I teach the man and the woman this supreme lesson to know themselves!". (Chitra, 74)

This 'knowing themselves' is being 'Gender conscious', being conscious of femininity or masculinity. It is the consciousness which prompts Chitra to beg before Madana for feminine attributes: "O love, god love, thou hast laid now in the dust the vain pride of my man like strength; and all man's lies crushed under thy feet. Now teach me thy lessons; give me the power of the weak and the weapon of the unarmed hand." (Chitra, 74)

Thus gender consciousness makes Chitra despise her acquired masculinity and prompts her to long for her inborn lost femininity.

Chitra's dilemma: Her 'to be or not to be' moment in the light of 'Gender Consciousness':

Chitra, blessed with perfect beauty, succeeds in attracting Arjuna yet falters when time comes to accept his love. She herself fails to understand why she refused Arjuna's proposal. Being a woman she yearns for true love. Arjuna is not aware of her 'true self'. Such Love is unacceptable to a woman. To quote Gaurav Pradhan:

"Rabindranath Tagore does not think that woman is a commodity, the value of which will be assessed in the open market. Woman to him is not a lump of flesh but she carries a deep inner meaning. She is the product of rhythm and image of wholeness." (*Literary concepts of Tagore*, 85)

The gender specific yearning for true love refrains Chitra from surrendering at the altar of Arjuna's lust for her beauty. But at a weak moment she can't resist herself and falls for it saying "take me, take all I am". But after waking up she repents what she did. Her self esteem is hurt. She wants to run away from herself. Her borrowed beauty becomes her enemy. A strong woman within her does not like to be a mere 'plaything'- an object of desire. She tells Madana about her plight-

"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 everyday, to send her to my beloved and see her caressed by him. O God, take back thy boon." (Chitra, 82)

Chitra knows that Arjuna's love is not for her 'real self', it is for her outward fake appearance. So she plans to end the dilemma by revealing the truth. This shows her courageous nature. She tells Madana-"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." (Chitra, 82)

Madana and Vasanta put an end to her dilemma by advising her to live with Arjuna for a year. She is

also granted a year of perfect beauty. Unfortunately, throughout the blissful moments of their union, she could not forget the duality of her being:- a beautiful body eager to be one with her beloved and a defeated soul still hungry for love.

Chitra's final revelation: Challenging Gender Dichotomy to attain Clarity and Equality

Gender dichotomy is the state of being aware of the differences between male and female. It also implies creating opportunities for realising the potentials despite the observed differences.

Gender dichotomy is evident in the behaviour and responses of both Chitra and Arjuna.

Arjuna, right from the beginning is quite a man-masculine, attractive and a worshipper of beauty who would conveniently forget-'the vow of celibacy' to fulfill his lust for beauty. Although strong and masculine outwardly, Chitra is quite a woman-sensitive, emotional and conscientious.

Quite like a man, Arjuna gets fed up with the celebration of love everyday. His mind wavers. The kshatriya in him beckons to go hunting and lead in the battlefield. Now to him, Chitra is like a gem which he has been holding in his right arm for a long time. He suddenly becomes aware of the duties of kshatriya and laments:

"My Kshatriya's right arm, idly occupied in holding it (the gem: Chitra), forgot his duties." (Chitra, 84)

The protector in Arjuna does not want to leave Chitra alone in the forest. Chitra, who knows the transient nature of her blessing of beauty does not wish to go with Arjuna to his kingdom and gradually the dichotomy deepens. The lover in Arjuna takes a backseat with the emergence of Kshatriya in him. His masculinity does not let him rest now in the arms of beauty. Chitra also shows gender specific behaviour. She is willing to sacrifice at the altar of love. She is willing to be satisfied and happy with the short span of fulfillment which she experienced in Arjuna's company. Both of them are the prototypes of their respective genders- a man yearning for ecstasy of union with eternal beauty and a woman eager to surrender herself at the feet of manliness.

Once the brief encounter with beauty is over, Arjuna gets attached to the empowered and brave Chitra who is the protector of her people. Now to him a strong woman who has the potential to protect people seems more charming and attractive than a beautiful woman who could just be an object of desire.

Chitra also undergoes a change and realises futility in getting trapped in a borrowed beautiful form. When she realises that Arjuna is in love with the

real Chitra- an empowered and strong Princess of Manipur, she reveals her true self. Going a step further she confidently tells Arjuna that she would train their baby to be a second Arjuna. Real Chitra longs for respect from Arjuna for her qualities of head and heart. She minces no words in telling Arjuna her worth in the end. With great pride she says:

"I am Chitra. No goddess 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 oath of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self." (Chitra, 92)

Arjuna too, accepts her as his equal, not as a fairer or weaker sex but as an equal partner.

Thus Chitra challenges gender dichotomy and proves that the genders are not watertight compartments. Human attributes and attitudes cannot be divided into genders. When time comes, the so called fairer or weaker sex proves to be stronger and braver than her male counterpart.

Chitra's revelation about her true self helps both of them attain clarity regarding the gender identity thrust upon them. Chitra not just accepts her masculine and not so beautiful body with pride but also helps Arjuna realize that just beauty is not the worth of a woman. She could be much more than just being an object of desire. She proved that a woman can retain her womanliness and still can be as strong and valiant as a man. Dichotomy resolves and equality is achieved when completeness is sought through the union based upon mutual self surrender. Arjuna's response to Chitra's revelation comes as a fresh breeze of fragrant air when he praises Chitra's courage and truthfulness by saying-"Beloved, my life is full." (Chitra, 92)

Conclusion:

Rabindranath Tagore's concept of woman was revolutionary for his own time. For him the perfect woman has in her a unique combination of in-depth feelings and sharp intellect. He never

considered strength, bravery and valour to be the attributes of male only. Tagore's Chitra proves it beautifully with her wit and intellect and compels Arjuna to accept her as his equal. This journey from dilemma to clarity, from dichotomy to equality delicately traces the ebb and tide of the feelings of both the genders through the characters of Chitra and Arjuna.

The play Chitra is a beautiful attempt by Tagore to uphold gender equality. Gaurav Pradhan in his book on Rabindranath Tagore's literary concepts aptly interprets Tagore's views on woman. He writes- "Society has deprived woman of her due position of honour. But to win that place women must rise up to it. For true honour does not come as a gift from outside, it has to be acquired. Consciously or unconsciously woman has often remained untended to be the objects of affording pleasure or gratification of their desire to man. There can be no better degradation of womanhood. Unless men feel women to be his equal in spirit and intellect he will cast her off after the fleeting moments of enjoyment have passed." (*Literary concepts of Tagore, 71*)

This analysis aptly explains Arjuna's gender specific mentality when he soon becomes tired of beautiful 'Chitra' and yearns for what Chitra who is affectionate as a woman yet heroic as man; who is not just for satisfying man's lust but best adornment for the arms of kshatriya. Indeed gender dichotomy beautifully resolves into gender equality in the play 'Chitra' in the end when her true worth is realised and revealed by Chitra and accepted happily and unconditionally by 'Arjuna'.

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