

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Reimagining Womanhood and Agency: A Feminist Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra*

Dr. Kambhampati Rajesh

Associate Professor & Head

Department of English, Central University of Jammu
Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir State, India.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.1.294](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.1.294)



Article info

Article Received: 20/02/2025
Article Accepted: 27/03/2025
Published online: 31/03/2025

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's one-act play *Chitra* (1913) dramatizes the struggle of a woman who must negotiate between her authentic self and the gender performance expected of her by society. Chitra, raised as a warrior in the kingdom of Manipur, faces a conflict when she falls in love with Arjuna and believes that her natural self will not be accepted. The play interrogates the politics of gender performance, bodily autonomy, and selfhood. This research article argues that Tagore constructs Chitra's transformation not merely as a personal romantic journey but as a feminist critique of patriarchy. Her journey from concealment to revelation becomes an allegory of women's struggle to reclaim subjectivity in a society where femininity is socially manufactured. The paper situates Tagore's work within early 20th-century social reform and emerging feminist discourse, demonstrating how *Chitra* anticipates modern debates on female agency, identity construction, and ethical love. Through textual analysis and theoretical engagement with Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Indian feminist thought, this article shows that Chitra embodies resistance against patriarchal prescriptions and ultimately asserts self-ownership. Although rooted in Tagore's historical moment, the play continues to speak to contemporary concerns about gender, identity, and autonomy.

Keywords: Tagore; *Chitra*; feminism; gender identity; autonomy; agency; gender performance; womanhood; modern drama; selfhood.

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra* occupies a distinguished position in modern Indian dramatic literature for its portrayal of a woman

negotiating identity in a patriarchal world. Written during a period when nationalist consciousness and social reform movements were shaping the intellectual discourse of India,

Chitra contributes to this reformatory energy by contesting assumptions surrounding femininity. Rather than presenting a passive female protagonist, Tagore constructs Chitra as a warrior trained in physical strength, rational decision-making, and leadership. However, her masculine upbringing becomes a source of contradiction when she seeks romantic love, revealing the gendered constructs that delimit women's emotional and bodily autonomy. Chitra's ethical dilemma—whether to present her natural self or conform to idealized femininity—becomes the central framework through which the play interrogates gender performance.

Tagore invites the reader to reflect on how society constructs unrealistic standards of womanhood and then compels women to perform them. Chitra is not lacking in capability, talent, or merit. She is instead lacking in what patriarchal culture deems desirable: beauty, delicacy, and submissiveness. The problem, therefore, does not lie in her selfhood but in the social standards that evaluate her. The play questions how gender expectations distort authentic individuality and how women must struggle to reclaim autonomy. Through Chitra's emotional transformation—from insecurity to self-recognition—Tagore articulates an early feminist concern: a woman's right to be loved as she is.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

To understand the feminist implications of *Chitra*, it is necessary to examine the historical moment in which Tagore was writing. The early twentieth century in Bengal was marked by sociopolitical upheaval, debates about women's education, and legislative discussions on widow remarriage and child marriage. Although voices advocating women's rights were emerging, the prevailing cultural norm still envisioned women as confined to domesticity. Even within reformist movements, women were frequently idealized as symbols—of purity, sacrifice, or

nationhood—rather than recognized as individuals possessing agency.

Tagore, influenced by the Brahmo Samaj movement and by humanist philosophy, believed that true freedom included women's emancipation from social constraints. His female characters consistently resist cultural scripts that limit their autonomy (*The Home and the World*, *Gora*, *Muktadhara*). In *Chitra*, instead of portraying a woman who conforms to patriarchal norms, he constructs a protagonist whose upbringing violates gender binaries. Chitra is raised as a son by her father King Chitravahana, not allowed to conform to the expected domestic sphere. She is trained as a warrior, given access to roles historically denied to women. This move gives Chitra agency but also introduces conflict, for society recognizes her masculine training while denying her the emotional fulfillment associated with womanhood.

Set against this background, *Chitra* emerges as a text that challenges patriarchal systems at two levels: at the level of myth and at the level of contemporary society. Tagore reinterprets a story from the *Mahabharata*, yet instead of glorifying heroic masculinity, he foregrounds the emotional and ethical struggles of a woman whose desire for acceptance leads her to confront the limitations of gender constructs. The play becomes both a reinterpretation of myth and a critique of social norms.

3. Close Reading: Gender Performance and the Crisis of Identity

The emotional core of *Chitra* lies in Chitra's struggle between her authentic self and the socially desirable self. When she meets Arjuna and falls in love, she believes her natural self will not attract him. She therefore approaches the gods of Love (Madana) and Spring (Vasanta) and asks them to transform her into a woman possessing idealized beauty. The transformation—granted only for one year—operates as an allegory for gender performance.

Chitra's beauty becomes a costume, and her femininity becomes a performance designed for male validation. Tagore uses this temporary transformation to expose the fragility of patriarchal notions of femininity.

Chitra's beauty attracts Arjuna, but she does not receive fulfillment because the attraction is superficial. Arjuna loves the beauty, not the person. When Chitra states, "*I am weary of this borrowed beauty*," she articulates a critical insight: objectification produces emotional alienation. Her borrowed femininity, instead of empowering her, weakens her autonomy because she becomes dependent on external approval. This crisis becomes a turning point. Chitra realizes that beauty cannot sustain emotional intimacy – identity must.

The dramatic tension arises not from whether Arjuna will accept her, but from whether she will accept herself. The play shifts from a romantic narrative to a psychological struggle for self-recognition. Chitra's internal conflict echoes feminist concerns: identity cannot be constructed to satisfy the gaze of another; it must arise from selfhood.

The climax of the play occurs when Chitra reveals her true self to Arjuna – not with fear, but with dignity. She declares, "*I am Chitra. No goddess to worship, nor yet the – woman you desired.*" The pause before "woman" in the line reveals that femininity, as society defines it, is a role imposed upon her. Chitra asserts that love must recognize authenticity.

4. Symbolism and Narrative Style: The Warrior-Woman as Metaphor

Tagore employs symbolism not merely to embellish the narrative but to construct an argument. Chitra symbolizes the modern woman who is caught between gained agency (education, public presence, leadership) and social expectations that continue to define her in terms of male desire. Her warrior identity represents autonomy, courage, and self-respect; her disguised beauty represents social compromise and emotional vulnerability.

Madana and Vasanta symbolize forces that enable gender illusion – beauty becomes a constructed artifice, not a natural truth. The limited duration of her beauty signifies that such gender constructs are temporary masks. Once the time is over, the illusion dissolves, revealing the truth of individuality beneath the performance.

Tagore's narrative technique is minimalist. With only a few characters, the play maintains psychological intensity. The absence of a conventional plot structure shifts focus from action to introspection, functioning almost as a dramatic monologue in motion. By eliminating external conflict, Tagore intensifies internal conflict. Chitra becomes both the subject and the battlefield – the arena where patriarchal norms are interrogated.

Thus, Chitra becomes a metaphor for every woman asked to perform gender rather than live identity.

5. Feminist Theoretical Perspectives: Agency, Embodiment, and the Unlearning of Patriarchal Gaze

A deeper theoretical engagement with *Chitra* situates the play within the intellectual frameworks later articulated by feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Although Tagore predates second-wave feminism by several decades, his portrayal of Chitra anticipates these theoretical concerns with striking clarity. Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, famously asserts, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" This assertion aligns perfectly with Chitra's dilemma. Chitra is not allowed to "be" a woman; she must "perform" womanhood as defined by patriarchal expectations. She has been raised like a "son," and therefore lacks the socially constructed attributes assigned to femininity: decorative beauty, softness, emotional yielding. Her transformation into a beautiful woman is thus not a biological shift but a gendered

performance, an externalization of what society expects a desirable woman to be.

Judith Butler's concept of *gender performativity* further illuminates Chitra's conflict. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity but a repeated performance shaped by cultural norms. Chitra's yearlong transformation becomes a literal enactment of Butler's thesis. She performs femininity by adopting beauty, grace, sensuality – not because these traits are natural to her, but because she believes they are necessary to gain male acceptance. Her "borrowed beauty" is Butler's theory dramatized: femininity becomes costume, choreography, artifice. Through this performance, Tagore critiques the male gaze, a concept later expressed by Laura Mulvey, where a woman's value is reduced to visual pleasure. Chitra internalizes this gaze when she tells the gods that no man will love her if she does not embody beauty. Her belief exposes structural conditioning: society trains women to value themselves only through male approval.

Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" also applies to Chitra. Though she can fight battles, ride horses, and lead armies, she cannot declare her love without adopting beauty first. Her real voice – rational, assertive, confident – is not considered feminine. She must borrow a different identity to be heard. Tagore exposes how patriarchy silences women not by force, but by conditioning them to believe that only one version of femininity deserves attention.

Thus, Tagore's *Chitra* implicitly argues:

A woman gains true love only when she is free from the obligation to perform femininity.

Chitra eventually rejects beauty and asserts her authentic identity, proving that agency arises not when a woman becomes desirable, but when she becomes self-owned.

6. Contemporary Relevance: Modern Feminist Resonance and Identity Politics

Despite being written in 1913, *Chitra* remains remarkably relevant in the twenty-first century. Contemporary society continues to impose restrictive beauty standards on women, and the burden of performance persists – even when women advance in education, careers, or leadership. Chitra's conflict mirrors modern anxieties: women today are often encouraged to be accomplished, assertive, independent, yet simultaneously are told to conform to aesthetic expectations. Modern feminist movements continue to challenge beauty-centered validation, body policing, and the commodification of femininity. Chitra's struggle anticipates these debates, demonstrating that the pressure to look desirable can reduce a woman's worth to appearance rather than character or capability.

Furthermore, the play speaks to young women navigating digital culture, where identity is curated and approved through external validation (likes, views, comments), reinforcing the idea that value comes from visual appeal. Chitra's emotional exhaustion – "*I am weary of this borrowed beauty*" – echoes in contemporary experiences of social-media-constructed identities. The exhaustion of performing perfection remains universal.

Chitra's transformation at the end of the play – where she discards illusions and claims her true identity – becomes a timeless message that liberation begins when women refuse to seek permission to exist. By revealing herself to Arjuna not as a "goddess" or an object of beauty but as a human being, Chitra asserts what modern feminism strives to articulate: a woman does not exist to fulfill the expectations of others; she exists for herself.

Thus, *Chitra* participates in modern conversations on gender equality by showing that true empowerment arises when identity is self-defined rather than socially imposed.

7. Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra* is more than a romantic retelling of a classical myth; it is an early feminist text that interrogates how womanhood is constructed, regulated, and performed. By dramatizing Chitra's emotional journey from invisibility to self-assertion, Tagore exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchy shapes female identity. Chitra becomes a site of struggle between authenticity and expectation, between inner truth and social deception. Her decision to abandon artificial beauty and reveal her true self marks the ethical center of the play: freedom and love are meaningful only when rooted in authenticity. Tagore asserts that womanhood is not a state of pleasing others but a claim to ownership over one's body, identity, and voice. In doing so, *Chitra* becomes a landmark text that anticipates modern feminist theory and challenges audiences to rethink how societies define women. The play leaves a powerful message: a woman's worth does not lie in how she appears, but in who she is.

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