

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY CHITRA- RAVINDRANATHA TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore has described the journey of a woman character from ignorance to knowledge. Self-consciousness in the character plays a vital role in the development. The story is from Mahabharata. Chitra, King Chitravahana's heir, who has been raised like a son seeks the help from Gods Madhana, lord of love and Vasantha, lord of spring and beauty, to make her attractive for a single day as she has lost her heart to Arjuna. The Gods endow her with an enviable beauty for a year. Arjuna violates his vow of celibacy under the impression of Chitra's heavenly beauty. At the end of the year Arjuna comes to know the truth during a crisis where Chitra, the princess has to save the villager from the robbers. She is also tired of the burden of the beauty that she has been carrying for one year and she says that she is a human being, not a goddess to be worshiped. Through Chitra, Tagore brings home to us that beauty and youth are transient. Chitra gets courage and inspiration out of her self-consciousness and acts further.

Key Words: Self-consciousness, beauty, transience

The genesis of *Chitra*, as the author recalled it, was his delight at the sight of the profusion of spring flowers, and the following depression he suffered while pondering over their evanescence and his final consolation that even if the flowers fade and wither, their fruits would throw the seeds into the future. At the same time the episode of Arjuna and Chitra of the *Mahabharata* was floating in his mind. The pollination of the philosophy of spring with the myth of the *Mahabharata* resulted in the fruition of Chitra.

"I accord music a much higher place than the one accorded to by the musicians. Their edifice of music is built on some lifeless, inanimate notes; mine of an animated, deathless, elemental feeling. They want to place the notes above the words: I want to place the words above the notes. They use words to produce a note; I use notes to produce the words..... A song is like breathing. It cannot be read; it can only be heard."¹

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra*, a lyrical and metaphorical drama, written in 1913, is a fine example of Tagorean philosophy of truth and illusion. It shows his great mastery over music and metaphor. It deals with, apart from many other things, human love from the physical to the spiritual, from transience to permanence, from romanticism to realism. It also shows how a number of saints and sages have surrendered their life-long penance at the feet of a woman; how the sensual and mundane mortality is transcended into spirituality; how the union of man and woman is lastly sanctified through marriage; and, above all, how fame, pride and prowess have to come down before beauty, even though transitorily. In technique and style, the play is richly metaphoric, alliterative and musical. It is a fine example of the appropriate blending of feeling and form, fact and fantasy.

Rabindranath Tagore's plays are basically expression of the soul's quest for beauty and truth.

A close study of his plays reveals that Tagore probed deep into the mind of woman and presented a wide range of female characters. He drew the attention of the readers on numerous cases of social justice especially to woman. Besides this, he placed before the whole world the ideal to self-reliant in Indian woman fighting not for their own rights and desires but also for those of the subjugated nationality and downtrodden humanity. In *Chitra* Tagore presents a sensible and revolutionary ideal of a woman.

Tagore has developed a new technique in drama, which is generally aloof from the tradition of Shakespearean plays. His plays are very short, but epigrammatic, and are suffused with the unfathomable depths of imagination and emotion. Commenting on his plays, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

“The meaning of a poetic play is no rocky substance. And we know that even a rock is hard in appearance. Break the rock into atoms and the atoms into the hundred or more sub-atomic particles that are gyrating wildly—and where are we? We have to grope towards a meaning, and even if we have only a tenuous something to hold on to, the adventure itself will not have been in vain. So, it is with Tagore’s plays”.²

In other words, Tagore’s plays do not need cerebral gymnastics on the part of a reader or a viewer to understand their rich implication as we generally find in the modern poetic drama mainly written by T.S. Eliot. The only thing Tagore’s plays need most is our sensibility. Almost all the plays of Tagore ring the note of music and rhythm, love and spirituality, metaphor and symbols. Perhaps this is why they directly appeal to the readers’ heart rather than to their mind. But sometimes they are so loaded with the allusions to the Upanishads that they cannot be understood properly if the reader does not take the help of intuition. In Tagore’s plays, it is not the plot, but the music of ideas and symbols, the soul of the drama, which form the core; it is “this richness of the undertones—is what matters, for this alone kindles the sluggish soul to a new awareness of life’s deep magic”.³

Of all the plays of Tagore’s, *Chitra* is doubtless the most fascinating, and the most satisfying. “One of Rabindranath’s most beautiful

plays, perhaps the only one that is flawless”, says Krishna Kripalani; “his loveliest drama, a lyrical feast”, says Edward Thompson; “even in the English rendering, the play is a thing of beauty”, says Masti Venkatesa Iyengar. The genesis of the play, too, is significant. Once observing in early April the burst of spring blossoming in the trees, Tagore seems to have mused whether a woman would not look upon her physical beauty as an enemy since it was apt, in spite of its transience, to engross the lover to the point of ignoring the more enduring qualities of the mind and soul. The beauty and fragrance of flowers is the means by which the bee is attracted, and fruits are the ultimate result. But men and women are more than reproductive mechanisms. They have received the accession of the mind; they have grown in a spiritual dimension. Hence to subsist merely in the physical is to lose even that, for the appetite soon sickens or dies with its own surfeit, or turns to nausea or disgust instead. Tagore was seized by this ‘idea’ and he wished to incarnate it in a drama presenting the evolution of human love from the physical to the spiritual.

Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chitra* is a dramatic sermon on the theme of true love. *Chitra* is based on an episode of the *Mahabharata*. This play is a work of supreme art, a dream in an awakened state. Tagore’s conception of human love finds a beautiful expression in *Chitra*. It tells beautifully the story of the love between Arjuna, a great warrior and Chitragadha, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the King of Manipur.

The scene I deal with rejection of *Chitra* by Arjuna. Here Tagore takes the help of retrospective narrative, which is one of the important features of modern plays and psychological novels. *Chitra* tells Madana and Vasanta, how on seeing Arjuna, she had broken her bow and cast away her arrows, changed her boy’s attire to a woman’s and approached him—only to be rejected, because of his vow of celibacy! While she knows there is a long hard way of winning him—“it is the labour of a lifetime to make one’s true self known and honoured” (213).

So, *Chitra* prays to bless her with some extraordinary youth and beauty at least for a day, and which she was granted: “Not for the short span of a

day, but for one whole year the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs" (213).

The scene II deals with the rejection of Arjuna by Chitra. The great warrior Arjuna is seen surrendering his bow and arrows before the enthralling beauty of Chitra. He becomes a love guest at her door. And thus, all his austerity and long-cherished celibacy prostrate before the feet of beauty. Arjuna says: "But you have dissolved my vow even as the moon dissolves the night's vow of obscurity" (217).

When Arjuna, forgetting his vows, seeks the new Chitra in the temple, she is more saddened than elated. She realizes how the fame of Arjuna's heroic manhood is false. "Alas, it is not I, not I, Arjuna! It is the deceit of a god. Go, go . . . Woo not falsehood, offer not your great heart to an illusion, Go"! (217-218).

Scene III opens with the delirious union of Chitra and Arjuna. It is again in retrospective narration. Chitra tells Madana and Vasanta how after union "heaven and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life merged together in an unbearable ecstasy" (220). But in spite of this unfathomable pleasure, she is full of regrets because Arjuna had loved only "this borrowed beauty, this falsehood that enwraps us" (221). She is afraid that her body has become her own rival: "this cursed appearance companions me like a demon robbing me of all the prizes of love—all the kisses for which my heart is athirst" (221).

In scene IV, we see the gradual decline of Arjuna's infatuation. As the days pass, there is a perceptive decline in Arjuna's ardour. He has time to watch and to think. He is thinking of his home. When Chitra says that such evanescent love as theirs is not to be taken 'home', Arjuna wonders if she is not right. Difficult to say whether it is Chitra that is giving Arjuna eyes to see the prosaic unfolding truth, or whether she is too self-conscious, too distrustful of their love. When she invites him again to partake of love's excess, he also listens to the sound of prayer-bells from the distant village temple. On the other hand, Chitra is very curious to embrace Arjuna: "Let all vain bickering of discontent die away at the sweet meeting of our lips" (223).

Scene V, the shortest scene in the play, an interlude, shows just a dialogue between the two gods—Madana and Vasanta. The ardour of Vasanta, the god of youth and beauty cannot keep pace with the demands of Madana, the god of love. He says that in spite of his best efforts he is unable to evoke love in the heart of Arjuna. Madana replies that Vasanta is as fickle as a child. There is the inevitable weakening of spring, as it draws to a close.

Scene VI shows a further decline of Arjuna's infatuation for Chitra. Arjuna, who readily changed from asceticism to love, now longs for the old days when he hunted in his brother's company. He strongly suffers from the scene of nostalgia for going home and also for hunting in the forest with his four brothers. Introspection puzzles him, and he wonders who his beautiful companion is—and where her home is, and who her parents, might be. "Give me something to clasp", he says "Something that can last longer than pleasure, that can endure even through suffering" (227). He also imagines how, while returning from the forest, they have to swim across turbulent waters. He says, "My heart is unsatisfied, my mind knows no peace" (226).

Scene VII acts like another Interlude. Madana and Vasanta bless Chitra with inexhaustible stores of spring and love. Madana grants Chitra's wish that her beauty should flash brightest on the last night of spring. Vasanta promises to fill her life with a hundred fragrant jasmine flowers.

Scene VIII opens with the scene of the villagers and Arjuna. Arjuna hears from stray villagers of Princess Chitra, now gone on a pilgrimage. The villagers tell Arjuna that they are always protected by the Princess Chitra, who is the terror of all evil doers. He throws the "challenge", that they too—he and the beautiful woman by his side—should leave the enervating ardour of love and race on their horses to the field of action. And this challenge provokes the appropriate response.

The last scene IX ends with the reality of complete fulfillment, Chitra reveals her real self to Arjuna, imagining her as a traveler in the path of the great world. She says that her garments are dirty and her feet are bleeding with thorns. She also reveals that she is nourishing a very beautiful gift of Arjuna in her womb: "If your babe", she says

"Whom I am nourishing in my womb, be born a son, I shall myself teach him to be a second Arjuna and send him to you when the time come (235). This sweet and promising statement makes Arjuna fully satisfied, he cannot help without expressing a sense of complete fulfillment.

In a review of the play which appeared in the *Indian Review* (August 1914), J.C. Rollo remarked that although "it is not equal to the *Gitanjali* in profundity or strength, to *The Gardener* in the play of varied human emotion, to the delicate and exquisite suggestiveness of *The Crescent Moon*," yet it is no less masterly:

"There is the same beauty of phrasing the same flowing, ever-satisfying rhythm, and in its thought there is the same firm holds upon reality, the same truth of feeling and of sympathy, and the same arresting power of symbolism."⁴

What merits our attention much in Chitra is Tagore's deep and profound use of symbolism suffused with music and rhythm. As a matter of fact, however rich one's philosophy may be, it has a very little significance in the realm of art and literature unless it is woven into the fabric of art-words and diction, images and symbols. A true art calls for a "unified sensibility" that is, in feeling and thinking together. It must have both poetic truth and poetic beauty. Sometimes, it so happens that an artist presents his vision of life so beautifully that the feeling itself becomes form, or to quote Keats, a thing of beauty becomes a joy forever. This is exactly what we notice in most of the works of Tagore, especially in *Chitra*. Here, it is not the bare information or the history of a particular period that matters but the way of presentation, the poetic exuberance, the metaphoric structure, the imaginative flight of the poet on 'the viewless wings of poesy.' Tagore is of the opinion that:

"Bare information on facts is not literature, because it gives us merely the facts which are independent of our selves. Repetition of the facts that the sun is round, water is liquid fire if hot, would be intolerable. But a description of the beauty of the sunrise has its eternal interest for us,--because there it is not the fact of the sunrise, but its relation to ourselves, which is the object of perennial interest."⁵

It is also interesting to note here that most of the images and symbols employed by Tagore have come out from nature, from the day-to-day life of common man. They seem to be richly influenced by Wordsworth and Keats, Shelley and Tennyson. In the very opening of the drama, Tagore shows his deft mastery of nature images through the retrospective vision of the protagonist: "I found a narrow sinuous' path meandering through the dusk of the entangled boughs, the foliage vibrated with the chirping of crickets, when of a sudden I came upon a man lying on a bed of dried leaves, across my path" (211). Well, the protagonist of the book, Chitra, behaves like a boy, and so when she sees Arjuna in the forest, all of a sudden she felt a woman in her heart. This scene reminds us of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Miranda, the girl of nature, is startled to see Ferdinand and, consequently, she fell in love with him.

Tagore's *Chitra* is like Kalidas's *Shakuntala*, epitome of youth, love and romance. Chitra is an unself-conscious girl, wearing a boy's attire. She has been portrayed by Tagore as a bare simplicity of truth. To realize her ambition she reveals her agony and makes a declaration:

I am not the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence, feeding it with nightly tears and covering it with the daily patient smile, a widow from her birth. The flower of my desire shall never drop the dust before it has ripened to fruit (211).

Chitra is a significant fusion of the two kinds of woman characters—the emotional and the tranquil. Chitra has not learned archery, growing from innocent girlhood to the mellowness of motherhood; which can be traced from reality to the transition from the fire of flowery spring to the mellow fruitfulness of autumn. She advances from the paradise of sensual rapture to the ecstasy of illumination and the sustaining delight of wisdom.

The feminine charm she has acquired after the experience makes her,

The mother, throned on the fullness of golden autumn, she who in the harness time brings, straying hearts to the smile sweet as tears, the beauty deep as the sex of silence, brings them to the temple of the unknown, at the holy opulence of Life and Death (213).

Arjuna accepts her in bliss when she casts on him a tranquillising spell, "Beloved, My life is full" (235).

Tagore's conception of human love finds a beautiful expression in Chitra. We get in Chitra's personality the first clear expression of feminism in India. The play promotes the concept of equality of women even in the field specially reserved for men. Chitra is not a woman who arouses her despair in lonely silence, she is no goddess to be worshiped, nor yet do the objects of common pity to be brushed aside like the moth with indifference. She has certainly lost one paradise but she has gained another instead, which is the real paradise where woman holds undisputed sovereignty as devoted wife and mother.

By the character of Chitra, Tagore forcefully portrays the picture of modern Indian woman, promoting the higher spiritual and psychological sensibilities. On the one hand Chitra is a very promising princess and bears all the responsibilities towards kingdom on the other hand she is a devoted beloved of Arjuna, and becomes the victim of love and emotions. Arjuna thinks of her as a goddess of victory and says:

Like a watchful lioness she protects the litter at her dugs with a fierce love. Woman's arms though adorned with naught, but unfettered strength, are beautiful! My heart is restless, fair one, like a serpent, reviving from his long winter's sleep. Come, let us both race on swift horses by side, like twin orbs of light sweeping through space (233).

Chitra is a bold, courageous, daring and determined woman. Moreover she is full of the feeling of dedication and devotion towards her duties. She has all the capabilities, which a king should have. She lacks womanly grace, tenderness and overall physical charm.

Through Chitra Tagore reveals two aspects of a woman. The first one is strong enough to win the biggest battle of the world and the other one that easily gets shattered by one flow of emotion. She is a complete personality of a woman, who not only has commendable patience, sacrifice and dedication but also is ready to face any situation for fulfilling her ambitions and desires. Tagore beautifully depicts her as a great mental conflict on the one

hand, and her strength and determination on the other. Chitra has a tender heart within her strong body, she willfully changes her personality for the sake of love but also let not die her existence. Chitra suffers a great mental conflict while presenting her false endeavour before Arjuna and says: "My body has 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" (226).

This attitude reveals the reality about the very nature of the woman, for the sake of love and true relationship she can do anything up to any extent and can sacrifice her life too. But when the matter comes on her existence she is ready to lose the most precious thing of her life. She says: "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" (227).

Though she gets success in winning the heart of Arjuna by her borrowed grace, she fails before her own self. Chitra very soon realizes the misdeed she has done and wants to deprive herself from that falsehood which unfortunately becomes the base of that pious feeling. She is ready to come out of her illusive face and wants her true self loved by Arjuna which is capable of participating in his every brave action. She says to Arjuna: "If you design 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" (235).

This is what the new feminist movement in India stands for as it was heralded by Tagore and these words of Chitra are undoubtedly a great source of inspiration to the young educated women in the twentieth century.

Though Chitra is not gifted with the tenderness of flowers, she has challenging courage like great warriors. Her eyes are not attractive but everybody likes to see bow in her hand. Men may not get attracted towards her physical charm but brave salute her.

The play is a journey from the physical attraction to the spiritual love and Chitra acts as a bridge between the two. Chitra gets infatuated towards the heroic splendor of Arjuna but Arjuna offers his love to Chitra and is ready to break his vow of celibacy for the sake of her physical charm

which she borrowed as a grace from the God for winning the love of Arjuna. Chitra is not thrilled with joy, the real sense of woman becomes gradually stronger and she says:

Whom do you seek in these dark eyes, in these milk-white arms, if you are ready to pay for her the price of your probity? Not my true self, I know. Surely this cannot be loved; this is not man's highest homage to woman! Alas, that this frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the light of deathless spirit! Yes, now indeed, I know Arjuna, the fame of your heroic manhood is false (223).

Chitra candidly confesses what she is in actuality. She lights from the world of dreams, poetry and romance woven around her to the world of reality, where by the delicate play things of transient youth which she had clocked around herself, now leave her. Arjuna never seems to comprehend her as he considers her to be a goddess hidden within a golden icon on account of which he cannot touch her and pay her his homage in return for her priceless gifts. She advances with a false front towards Arjuna, her lover. But shortly later, the time arrives when she throws off her ornaments and veils, and stands clothed in unsheathed dignity.

Chitra is fully conscious that her procured beauty would shortly vanish, as the petals fall from an overblown flower, the only moment of her sweet union would slip from her, leaving her ashamed of her exposed poverty, which she will spend weeping day and night. It is impossible for her to keep her disguise and she prefers to accept truth sooner than the false happiness.

Now the illusion is shattered and Chitra, the playmate of Arjuna's night appears as the help mate of the day showing her true self. Chitra says:

The gift that I proudly bring you is the heart of a woman. Here have all pains and joys gathered, the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of the dust. Here love springs up struggling towards immortal life. Herein lies an imperfection, which yet is noble and grand. If the flower-service is finished, my master, accept this as your servant for the days to come! (235).

Thus before parting from Chitra, Arjuna accepts her in bliss when she casts on him a

tranquilizing spell. Chitra becomes all the more beautiful because she has known love, and because she is now a prospective mother.

Tagore has very well succeeded in creating women in her complete endeavour, for him woman in true sense is the strongest and the tenderest creation of God. Women are the enthroned queens of the house full of self-respect and self-consideration, showing various moods. Chitra's words of surrender to Arjuna best sum up Tagore's attitude to women. Chitra boldly admits: "I am Chitra no goddess to be worshipped, or yet the objects of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference" (235).

Through Chitra, as an epitome of love, truth and beauty, Tagore brings home to us the simple truth of life that beauty and youth, although they may be transient, are yet a part of our experience.

The play is primarily about Chitra, a woman. But this play could easily have been written by Tagore from the point of view of man. We can imagine a man adopting extraneous or artificial means to win a woman. He thus abases himself in his own eyes, and later nurtures the worm of uncertainty and discontent, and also provokes in the woman a similar disquiet or faraway look of wild surmise. Abasement, whether it is man in relation to woman, or woman in relation to man, cannot lead to love: but 'devotion'—what Tagore calls *tapasya*—is not abasement. It is natural enough that beauty or glamour should *attract* in the first instance man to woman, or woman to man; but this 'attraction' has still to pass other tests before it can acquire the name and the glory of love. With man and woman the attraction, the coming together, is not the end, but only the beginning. It has to survive shared trials, shared sorrows, and the shared gradual failure of the bodily functions culminating in a shared old age.

The union of man and woman is the marriage of true minds. It is a whole spectrum ranging from the physical to the spiritual. It is not to be 'got' simply for the asking, or purchased, but to be striven for through *tapasya*, to be won and deserved as mutual self-giving at all levels of experience. Youth and beauty are transient, death is unavoidable: yet marriage achieves the miracle of 'beyonding' youth

and beauty—not ignoring them, but enjoying and yet exceeding them, leaving in the waters even when crossing the river to the far shore—and motherhood and fatherhood likewise achieve the miracle of continuity, in other words, the ‘beyonding’ of death itself.

Before the gods (or, simply, before the ardour of love and the glow of youth) deck her with captivating grace, Chitra is but a common enough object an unselfconscious girl wearing a boy’s attire. When she glows with beauty and youth and desire, she is the transient wonder of the woman in love. When the borrowed grace has been shed, Chitra is still beautiful because she has known love, and because she is now the prospective mother. Beauty and youth, although they may be transient and hence illusory, are yet a part of our experience. Arjuna himself sees this:

“Illusion is the first appearance of Truth. She advances towards her lover in disguise. But a time comes when she throws off her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity. I grope for that ultimate, *you* that bare simplicity of truth” (224).

Wisdom lies neither in looking upon the body and its beauty as ends in themselves nor in imagining that our life could be wholly separated from the physical base. Tagore rejected both the ‘negations,’ the ascetic’s denial of life as well as the sensualist’s denial of the spirit. The blinding and maddening ecstasy of the physical union is not denied in Chitra, but its transience is recognized; even as an illusion it is but “the first appearance of Truth”; and so Tagore wants us to look further and see, beyond the fever and the throb, the less evanescent, more subdued, joy of ‘holy’ wedded life.

Then he does not exist for us: then that dark chamber is totally empty and void—no *vina* ever breathed its music there—none called you or me in that chamber; then everything has been delusion and an idle dream (226).

The consummation of love taking place in the exuberant green world makes the point of epiphany in *Chitra*. Frye observes, “The point of epiphany may be given in erotic terms as a place of sexual fulfilment, where there is no apocalyptic vision but simply a sense of arriving at a summit of experience in nature.”⁶ As Endymion plunges into

the depth of a shadowy underworld in his love-quest, a dark unknown depth, Arjuna and Chitra enter a dream-birth in a shadowy land, a dark unfathomable place of secrecy. Even the moon hides herself. “One curtain of darkness covered all.” The bower as an erotic conclave stands as a setting for the romantic activity which follows the dictates of nature rather than the law of society. “Heaven and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life merged together in an unbearable ecstasy.”

Vow-breaking is often used as a strategy in the Indian mythological stories. In *Chitra*, it is handled as a multi-purpose device in building up the drama. It works as a turning point where the play gets a jolt and picks its way. Because of it, the theme of love in *Chitra* finds a firm hold. As far as the characterization is concerned, it puts Arjuna in the shade but brings Chitra into focus. With its help, Tagore seems to secure support to the fact that ascetic celibacy is unnatural. He convinces his audience that asceticism cannot be a match for sensuality. That is, asceticism cannot stand any challenge from sensuality. He clarifies that sensuality has its own limitations—the limiting factors being lust that cannot look like love for long and youth that runs out soon. In the words of K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger “Tagore rejected both ‘negations’—the ascetic’s denial of life as well as the sensualist’s denial of the spirit”.⁷ This implies that asceticism and sensuality negate the very essence of the life-force which thrives by striking a balance between sensuality and spirituality.

This balance is the one that Tagore aims at through his version not only of Chitra but also of Arjuna. Arjuna is seen being at the extremities, the extreme ends of asceticism and sensuality. At first, as a hermit he ignores the woman in Chitra. Later, being carried away by the voluptuous disguise of Chitra, he goes to the other extreme and fails to see the real woman in her. Becoming a sensualist, he falls a prey to falsehood. Nature itself, then, takes care of the situation: Arjuna becomes bored by his sensuality. Coming gradually out of the clutches of the unreality, he craves for the real Chitra. This achievement of Arjuna is accomplished not through the usual development in characterization; for, in the drama it is not shown as the result of any

conflict in his mind. What we find is a little tension in him. This failure of Tagore seems to be due to the built-in limitations of a one-act play. Through minor devices like association, the change is effected in the outlook of Arjuna. Everything is owed to the workings of nature. That is, the contribution of the artist here is in a meagre measure. But in the case of Chitra, it is altogether a different story. Chitra is Tagore's ultimate woman.

Chitra evokes varied responses. The cruelest of the comments is the denouncement of it as immoral. A few have found in it a glorification of sexual abandonment. A few more have seen in it the emancipation of the Indian woman. But always there has been an overwhelming fascination for *Chitra*. Yet, what is every time missed is the mental make-up of Chitra. She loves. But she is rejected. And it hurts her. Though she knows what to do to set the things right, she feels that she cannot wait. She depends on gods and attracts Arjuna. Her success proves to be unbearable for her as she thinks that she—the real woman in her—is not loved.

Chitra is fully conscious that her procured beauty would shortly vanish, as the petals fall from an overblown flower, the only moment of her sweet union would slip from her, leaving her ashamed of her exposed poverty, which she will spend weeping day and night, it is possible for her to keep her disguise and she prefers to accept hard truth sooner than the false happiness. And all the while she is aware of herself and boldly admits, "I am Chitra no goddess to be worshipped, or yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference".⁸ Chitra is beautiful because of this psychological conflict that goes on in her mind throughout the play.

The greatness of the play lies in Tagore's portrayal of both the beauty and pathos of Chitra in such a way that very soon the reader is transported to the world of the borrowed beauty and grandeur of the heroine, but at the other moment the reader is also led to the realm of pity and pathos through the weeping heart of Chitra, who is described as "a thirsty bee when summer blossoms lie dead in the dust" (222) or as "the dew that hangs on the tip of a *Kinsuka* petal has neither name nor

destination,"(220) or as "a deer afraid of her own shadow" (212). But the borrowed beauty gains a firm ground when it is translated into marriage and culminates in motherhood. It is the sense of motherhood that transfers the physical union of both the man and the woman into a permanent abode of spiritual happiness. Just after the togetherness, Chitra is seen more beautiful than before. Why? Because beauty and youth, though short-lived are yet the part and parcel of man's experience. That is why; Chitra realizes her worth as a woman in the last section of the play. She says: "The gift that I proudly bring to you is the heart of a woman. Here have all pains and joys gathered, the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of a dust; here love springs up struggling toward immortal life. Here in lies an imperfection which yet is noble and grand" (243). Through this union of man and woman, Tagore seems to suggest the story of human love from physical to spiritual, from the mundane to the sublime. The same is the case with the love between Shakuntala and Dushyanta in the play by Kalidasa. Tagore rightly observes: "One sudden gust of youthful impulse had in a moment given her up to Dushyanta, but that was not the true, the full winning of her. The means of winning is by devotion, by *tapasya* that they may gain each other truly, eternally the union of Dushyanta and Shakuntala in the first Act is futile, while their union in the last Act, as the parents of Bharata is a true union."⁹ This is exactly what we find in the love story of both Chitra and Arjuna. The play ends with the note of optimism: "Beloved my life is full." Arjuna, by the virtue of being a father, turns from illusion to reality.

A close study of the play reveals the fact that it is a play of various contrasts like fact and fantasy, illusion and reality, physical and spiritual, youth and beauty, so on and so forth. E.M. Forster rightly holds the view: "The story is told with faultless delicacy and grace. Its action is no stronger than a flower, and the fragrance of blossom clings round every phrase."¹⁰

It is to be noted that the charge is often leveled against Tagore that his plays are generally not meant for being staged; that they have inadequate dramatic action; that most of his

characters are one-dimensional and so they are not full-blooded; that his plots are loose and the structure is full of flaws; that most of his plays are melodramatic in endings. J.C. Ghosh opines: "A number of things repeat themselves monotonously in Tagore's serious plays: popular uprisings (which are as serious as tempests in tea-cups); and stock characters (e.g., Thakurdada, Dada, Visu) through whom the author speaks and sings more directly than through the other characters. The emotional and spiritual crisis is almost always brought about by a young girl."¹¹ But most of the charges leveled against Tagore are baseless. No doubt, his plays are seldom meant for arousing dramatic effect on the stage, but so far as the symbolic significance is concerned, they are superb and beyond description. We should not forget that most of the plays of Tagore are composed in the rich tradition of the Romantic poetry where there is little room for the dull brain which always perplexes and retards.

In *Chitra*, the central symbol is the offer of beauty to Chitra by the Gods, Madana and Vasanta, for the span of a year. What is most remarkable is that there is no obvious exhibition of this symbol, which grows so naturally and spontaneously out of the story that it is not noticed as a symbol in the beginning at all. Chitra, who is brought up as a son, falls in love with Arjuna, who sends her away, saying, "I have taken the vow of celibacy, I am not fit to be thy husband" (214), stung, desperate, she seeks the help of the gods, Madana and Vasanta, to whom she says, "Had I the time needed, I could win his heart by slow degrees, and ask no help of the Gods. But it is the labour of a lifetime to make one's true self known and honoured" (215). Her desire cries impatiently for instant satisfaction. She requests: "For a single day make me superbly beautiful. . . . Give me but one brief day of perfect beauty. . . ." (215). Her prayer is granted, but with a significant difference. Vasanta says, "Not for the short span of a day, but for one whole year the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs" (216). Once this is accepted—and this is easily accepted on the poetical-mythological level on which the play begins and moves—the action in a poetic-realistic mode, presenting Arjuna's infatuation, their Gandhara marriage, their living

together, Chitra's sorrow, Arjuna's boredom and his longing for the other Chitra, the falling off of Chitra's beauty-mask at the end of the year, Arjuna's happy acceptance of the real Chitra and the final spiritual consummation—presenting all these in a delightfully smooth way, offers no clash between the surface-poetic-realistic level and the deeper symbolic meaning. The latter is related to the essential duality of life, which manifests itself in the context of this story primarily as duality of love.

Above all the things Tagore has given for *Time* more importance. The significance of Time is first indicated in Chitra's words: "Had I but the *time* needed. . . . It is labour of a *lifetime* to make one's true self known and honoured" (232). The time element is significantly slipped into the play in the form of the god's offer of beauty to Chitra for the span of a *year*. This central symbol, so beautifully and organically lodged in the play, is assisted by the symbolic gods: Madana, the body-less (*ananga*) god of abiding love; and Vasanta, the time-bound god of spring (beauty, pleasure, youth, etc.) without whose assistance Madana cannot function.

To sum up, Tagore's *Chitra* is a fine example of his creative genius. It is the quintessence of romance. Thompson considers it "the loveliest drama and a lyrical feast"¹² and Ernest Rhys imagines it "a piece of sculptor".¹³ It is really a mirror of music and metaphors.

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