

Thinking Beyond Gender: Tagore's *Chitrangada*, the Breaking of the Stereotypes

Dr. Manika Saha

Gender refers to the biologically constructed characteristics of women, men, and children. This involves the norms, behaviors, and responsibilities that come with being a woman, male in the society as well as in interpersonal relationships. Sex as a social construct varies from one society to the next and can evolve over time. Gender has a historical and political base. Words like man, woman, boy, girl, etc. have evolved in the society and collected varied connotations over time. Biologically, an individual is born with an identity of a man or woman or sometimes with a third gender (who may not be categorized as male nor female). We can never change the instincts of an individual as it is genetically acquired, but the idea of being a 'man' or 'woman' purely depends on the individual. A person may be a male or a female by birth, but he or she may think of and be comfortable in another gender. Hence sex and gender may not always match. One's own gender may sometimes be a quest.

Our grand epic *Mahabharata*, has a galaxy of different and interesting characters. Chitrangada, the daughter of the king of Manipur and the wife or beloved of Arjuna is a remarkable character of the Indian Mythology. Arjuna, who was a celibate for twelve years, went to Manipur, met princess Chitrangada and married her. Chitrangada and Arjuna had a son named Bobhrubahan.

Our Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, reconstructed this story and produced his masterpiece, a poetic drama titled 'Chitrangada'. This work of Tagore tells us that the king of Manipur had raised and groomed his daughter as a male child, in other words, like a prince. He taught her warfare, archery, royal rules etc. Chitrangada grew up like a royal prince in the environment of all royal comfort. She was supposed to be a princess only but the gender stereotypes were defied. Lord Shiva had blessed Manipur that it will beget princes only, but a girl was born. Then the king decided to raise his child as a prince and as his successor and thus Chitrangada grew up as a prince. This is the framework of Rabindranath's Tagore's famous work, *Chitrangada*.

The king of Manipur raised Chitrangada as a male child. She was trained as a valiant prince. Hence, inspite of being born as a female child, manliness entered

her psyche. This 'manliness' has to be acquired even by men. Primary education, training and environment made Chitrangada manly. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book, *Le Deuxieme Sexe* translated into English as *The Second Sex* (1949) says that one doesn't take birth as a woman but grows up to be a woman.

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman .no biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (Beauvoir 293)

Since time immemorial, our society has made rules and opinions on child rearing. The social framework and guidelines coerce a child to grow up strictly as a female or a male. The concept of marriage and bearing children is introduced to the girls since their childhood and hence they grow up towards a fulfillment of their roles. On the other hand, a male child grows up as a male without any such constraints. Rabindranath Tagore, in his legendary work *Chitrangada* broke this stereotype thinking. Chitrangada was not the product of a society with stereotypical bindings or male chauvinism. In mentality, activities and personality, Chitrangada grew up as good as a man. But instincts do not change. Whatever manliness Chitrangada achieved, she was fundamentally a woman. Feminine qualities and instincts flowed in her blood.

During her youth, she started being and feeling feminine. First love, for many woman happens after meeting a man. The first meetings of Chitrangada with Arjuna made her infused with the feeling of first love. During a hunting activity, the celibate Arjun saw Chitrangada dressed as a man and took her very lightly as a funny boy. Chitrangada fell in love at the first sight of Arjuna.

বঁধু, কোন্ আলো লাগল চোখে!

বুঝি দীপ্তিরূপে ছিলে সূর্যালোকে!

ছিল মন তোমারি প্রতীক্ষা করি

যুগে যুগে দিন রাত্রি ধরি,

(I)

[Friends, what a light struck my eyes!/ Perhaps you were the sun in the domain of light. / My mind was waiting for you/ From age to age night and day.]

She expresses the eternal want and wait of a woman for a man. Chitrangada feels eternal love. She goes to Arjuna and submits herself before him, but Arjuna declines her offer. He explains that he is observing celibacy.

চিত্রাঙ্গদা! আমি তোমারে করিব নিবেদন
আমার হৃদয় প্রাণ মন!
অর্জুনা ক্ষমা করো আমায়,
বরণ যোগ্য নহি বরাসনে,
ব্রহ্মচারী ব্রতধারী।

(II)

[Chitrangada: I will dedicate my heart and soul to you. Arjun: Forgive me. I cannot accept you I have the vows of a Brahmachari.]

By his rejection Chitrangada becomes aware of the lack of tenderness, beauty, grace and charm in her which are an indispensable parts of a woman. The opposite way of grooming her as a male child had closed her doors of her first love! So, she prays to Madana or the god of love, for a year long to instill in her all the qualities of a woman. By his boon she turns into a heavenly beautiful lady full of charm, grace and elegance.

একী দেখি!
এ কে এল মোর দেহে
পূর্ব-ইতিহাসহারা!
আমি কোন্ গত জনমের স্বপ্ন;
বিশ্বের অপরিচিত আমি
আমি নহি রাজকন্যা চিত্রাঙ্গদা,

(III)

[What do I see!/ Who is this who has entered my body./ Previous history of women./ I am the dream of the last birth/ I a stranger to the world. /I am not Princess Chitrangada,]

By the blessings of Madan, the 'kurupa' Chitrangada turned into 'Shurupa'. Feminine beauty entered her body. Enthralled by the beauty of Chitrangada, Arjuna left the path of abstinence and accepted her. The moment Arjuna was about to submit to the beauty and charm of Chitrangada, she encountered an inner conflict! She felt that this love is due to her physical beauty and not because of the individual person in her. So, this love is false. A fight between ego of the personality and ego of the beauty is ensured. Chitrangada realized that beauty is just a cover that a person is under, which is false. In love, one must submit to the qualities and not to outer beauty. If a man gets attracted towards a woman due to her physical beauty, then that is the greatest disregard to womanhood. Rabindranath Tagore made us rethink on gender construction by the highlighting the above said conflict in Chitrangada. Chitrangada condemns Arjuna the lover. Again here, we can see how does the stereotype break.

ধিক্, পার্থ, ধিক্!
কে আমি, কী আছে মোর, কী দেখেছ তুমি,
কী জান আমারো কার লাগি আপনারে
হতেছ বিস্মৃত মুহূর্তে কে সত্যভঙ্গ
করি অর্জুনেরে করিতেছ অনর্জুন
কার তরে? মোর তরে নহে এই দুটি
নীলোৎপল নয়নের তরে; এই দুটি
নবনীলিন্দিত বাহুপাশে সব্যসাচী
অর্জুন দিয়াছে আসিধরা, দুই হস্তে
ছিন্ন করি সত্যের বন্ধনা কোথা গেল
প্রেমের মর্যাদা? কোথায় রহিল পড়ে

নারীর সম্মান? হায়, আমারে করিল
অতিক্রম আমার এ তুচ্ছ দেহখানা,
মৃত্যুহীন অন্তরের এই ছদ্মবেশ
ক্ষণস্থায়ী। এতক্ষণে পারিনু জানিতে
মিথ্যা খ্যাতি বীরত্ব তোমারা

(II)

[Alas , Partha, Alas !Who am I, what is mine, what have you seen, What do you know about me? For whom are you forgetting yourself. For a falsehood of a moment you are turning Arjuna into un-Arjuna. Not for me. For these two blue lotus eyes. What a shame, oh, what a shame!

Will you be ensnared thus, by this enchantress, caged, in your pursuit of chasing this mirage breaking the bondage of truth? Where is the honor of love? Where is the honor of women? Alas my trivial body has superceeded me. This outer disguise of inner immortal self is short lived. Now I have known your false honour of your valour]

She questions beauty that covers the inner self by a veil and is short-lived. For a true human being, no pretensions are required. If man gets attracted by the superficial beauty of a woman, then it is a matter of disgrace for the man and also an immense disrespect for the women because true love is not realised. The vastness and beauty of love is at stake then. Gradually, Chitrangada is able to convince Arjuna her opinion and make him realize the reality of love. Arjuna understands the vastness of real love. Finally, Arjuna wants to have Chitrangada the way she wants. She asserts her particular position. In society, the position of a woman ought to be just beside the man , she says.

Yes, worshipping a lady as a goddess or neglecting her as a waste, both are unacceptable. To give respect to a lady, we need to acknowledge her as equal to men and give her the required position in society.

Chitrangada of Rabindranath Tagore is totally different from the conventional or traditional women portrayed in India. The thought and the conflict of thoughts

from where Chitrangada has taken birth, symbolizes a long dispute. The evaluation of women in a male dominated society has got a new turning point through the character of Chitrangada. At the end of the poetic drama, Chitrangada tells Arjun, "You had refused to accept me as I didnot have the beauty of a woman and you could only see my manly features. I wanted to convince you being a man. By refusing that lady, Arjuna had done the right. The reason is that, if Arjun had accepted her only on the basis of kindness towards a woman, it would have been a big disrespect for women. Chitrangada would have kept on lamenting till death, because at that time, the lady lacked many aspects of a perfect woman. Whatever she had was incomplete. By the blessings of Madan, the beauty and elegance that Chitrangada achieved, is again partial. It was just a false veil. To be a complete woman, she has to be on the same axis as that of a man. She must sit just beside a man. Complete womanhood can be achieved only when man and woman share their happiness and woes together, only when they complement each other. Here again, we find a deviation from the traditional sociological mind set. It breaks the stereotype of woman as the subordinate. Chitrangada says....

আমি চিত্রাঙ্গদা।
দেবী নহি, নহি আমি সামান্য রমণী।
পূজা করি রাখিবে মাথায়, সেও আমি
নই; অবহেলা করি পুঁষিয়া রাখিবে
পিছে, সেও আমি নহি যদি পার্শ্বে রাখ
মোরে সংকটের পথে, দুরূহ চিন্তার
যদি অংশ দাও, যদি অনুমতি কর
কঠিন ব্রতের তব সহায় হইতে,
যদি সুখে দুঃখে মোরে কর সহচরী,
আমার পাইবে তবে পরিচয়।

(Chitrangada, 12)

[Chitrangada: I am Chitrangada, the precious daughter of the king of Manipur./Neither a goddess, nor a woman, commonplace and

mundane./Allowing me to be a true partner in your life's journey/ I am not the one you hail in the altar, worshipping,/Nor am I the one you keep behind you, in negligence./Once you recognize my essence, keeping me beside you/Amid your deep hours of crisis,/Allowing me to be a true partner in your life's journey,/A true accomplice in your missions,/Only then you will know my true self.]

It does not end here, Chitrangada proves that, she with her maternal education, has the capability to raise Bobhrubahon to become a second Arjuna. Maternal education and motherhood can make a child brave and valiant. This is the actual essence of womanhood. So Chitrangada tells Arjuna -

গর্ভে
আমি ধরেছি যে সন্তান তোমার, যদি
পুত্র হয়, আশৈশব বীর শিক্ষা দিয়ে
দ্বিতীয় অর্জুন করি তারে একদিন
পাঠাইয়া দিব যবে পিতার চরণে,
তখন জানিবে মোরে, প্রিয়তমা

(Chitrangada, 12)

[The child I have conceived in my womb, if the child is a male child , I will teach him to be second Arjuna/ and send him to his father /the you will know me, beloved]

Here the stereotype is challenged once more. She wants to raise her child alone, make him a second Arjuna and then send him to his father.]

Rabindranath's *Chitrangada* had been debated critically by Mr. Tomson. Mr. Pramatha Chowdhury had condemned the criticism. He read out an essay titled 'Chitrangada' in the Presidency College. On the request of Mr. Somnath Maitra, Mr. Pramatha Chowdhury had to speak on the poems of Rabindranath. He took the opportunity to criticize and oppose the views of Mr. Tomson. Maybe, Mr. Tomson was not fully aware of the Indian culture so, he interpreted *Chitrangada* from the Western point of view. Pramatha Chowdhury, in his essay 'Chitrangada', expressed that Mr. Tomson would have gained satisfaction only if Arjuna had accepted Chitrangada as his brother. Chitrangada not only wanted to be a lover but also a wife. Mr. Tomson could not second the final position of

Chitrangada. Pramatha Chowdhury pointed out that by portraying Chitrangada as a mother and a wife, Rabindranath has not made her erotic. Instead he has dignified her.

Discussing Tagore's drama *Chitrangada*, written in 1892, Pramatha Chowdhury observed that Rabindranath had created a world of beauty in which, "Chitrangada was an image — a reality in the realm of beauty. Rabindranath's artistic brilliance", Pramatha Chowdhury commented, "lay in his making Chitrangada a dream personified, independent of any historical context." According to Pramatha Chowdhury "Art, is the realization of the waking dream of the human mind, given expression in painting or music. And who else of the contemporary age but Rabindranath could claim such mastery over this technique." (Chowdhury 60-61)

Rituporno Ghosh, the famous film maker, has given a new face to the character of Chitrangada. In his film, he has represented Chitrangada as a Transgender. A human body built with the body of a man and the mind of a woman gradually evolves into a woman. Along with this long fight (sociological and political) of metamorphosis, he has given a symbolic representation of Chitrangada. Rituporno Ghosh, has interpreted the boon of Madan to gain physical beauty and charm, as cosmetic surgery. Even in his reconstruction of the character, we find breaking of the stereotype of the society. Actor and film maker Rituporno Ghosh has himself played the role of Chitrangada and portrayed his personal life through it.

The Chitrangada of Rabindranath Tagore and the Chitrangada of the film of Rituporno Ghosh educate us on gender binaries. The intellectual exercises of these great men have brought out the character of Chitrangada from myth to reality where they have newly reconstructed womanhood.

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