

# Political Responsibility: Gender And Governance In Rabindranath Tagore's Chitra And The King And The Queen

D. Paul Dinesh<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. C. Anita<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Sekkadu, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Sekkadu, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

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## ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring out the politics of gender assigned roles in Rabindranath Tagore's plays *Chitra* and *The King and the Queen*. *Chitra* is an adaption from an episode in the *Mahabharata*. The protagonist Chitra, is the princess of Manipur, while Sumitra is the Queen in *The King and the Queen*. Both the characters realize and embrace certain political commitments though in different ways. Chitra, being the only heir to the throne since her father had no son, is raised as to be a ruler and protector of the kingdom. On the other hand, Sumitra, steps up to safeguard her people when her husband, King Vikram, prioritizes his love for her neglecting his duties as a King. This paper explores how, initially, Chitra is carried away by illusion of beauty but gradually realizes that fulfilling her citizens' expectations lies the real beauty of a princess. Through her interaction with Arjuna, she understands that external beauty is temporary and not a virtue in itself. As a princess, her duty is to protect her kingdom rather than merely embodying celestial beauty and chasing love. Similarly, Sumitra loves her husband, yet when he is indifferent to the sufferings of his subjects, she assumes the role of a protector to save the citizens from a calamity. Thus, both *Chitra* and *The King and the Queen* illustrate Tagore's intention in investing political responsibilities to women. The protagonists' political commitment to their society, emphasizes the necessity of duty over personal desires.

**Key words:** Illusion, Realization, Gender roles, Subversion

Women have often been given secondary roles, stifled by society's demands for passivity, obedience, and caretaking. Society has offered stereotyped tailored definitions of femininity that encompasses characteristics like beauty, modesty and chastity that was promulgated and transmitted for centuries. The ancient literary texts have long portrayed that women as objects of desire and conquer for which huge wars were wages: it was said that all was fare in Love and War.

The patriarchal dictated norms hold women as submissive characters, either constrained to the home environment or as ideals of beauty and virtue. "Historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena; subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history" (Barad 3). However, recent literatures have contested stereotypes and have scrutinized and redefined the roles of women.

Women, who contest the conventional limits laid upon them, not only reject representations of embodying virtue, but as complex characters possessing courage, intellect, and strong sense of self- determination. These groundbreaking protagonists claim their independence and transcend social limitations offering a rich and empowering perspective on feminism. "By engaging with diverse perspectives, critiquing social injustices, and embracing experimentation, Indian authors contribute to a more equitable and inclusive world" (Bezbaruah & Kale).

The exploration of gender roles has long been a significant focus in recent literatures. Indian women in patriarchal structures demanded to be seen as individuals with certain wisdom especially women during the eve of Independence contributed much to the political activist groups. Earlier certain gender based clichés had kept them from being active participants of society: "The stories of feminism are likewise different. What however binds them is a history of a colonial past, despite the fact that the spread and impact of colonialism was uneven and differential. And subsequently, almost 65 years of development under a reasonably pro-

active Indian state” (Chaudhuri). Writers and thinkers, and Tagore being the forerunner in championing women’s rights, have vehicled their works to deconstruct the conventional roles of women being characterized in relation to their male counterparts but presented them as individuals who possess the power of resilience, prudence, decision-making capabilities, and leadership potential.

India was blessed with Rabindranath Tagore, a man of great literary excellence. He was a great poet, critic, and playwright of his time. Tagore’s plays *The King and the Queen* was published in 1889, and *Chitra* was first written in Bengali and then published in English in 1913 by the Indian Society of London. The following year, he went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature becoming the first non-European to win the honour.

Tagore’s plays *Chitra* and *The King and the Queen* reverses the roles of a woman who is a princess and a Queen respectively. In *Chitra*, Chitra is a princess of Manipur’s royal house. Her ancestor was granted a boon by Lord Shiva, promising an unbroken male dynasty. As a result, her father, the King of Manipur, accepted Chitra for who she truly was and treated her as a warrior rather than a mere princess. He taught her the art of archery, fencing and defending, which was thought of as a prince’s business. In *The King and the Queen*, Sumitra was a queen who deeply loved her husband, King Vikram. But as a ruler, Vikram was the very definition of irresponsibility; he puts his heart and soul in engaging with the aesthetic pleasures of life.

During the pre-independence period in India the mainstream discourse largely focused on national freedom and liberation. However, Rabindranath Tagore stood out by voicing concerns related to feminism and the liberation of women in society. He knew that political independence without women’s contribution to society would only be an unrealized dream. His works were written in a time when women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, Tagore envisioned them as leaders and protectors, capable of participating in political governance and taking on responsibilities essential to the nation’s future. His progressive vision was remarkably ahead of its time.

*Chitra* is a narrative of self-realization and political commitment. In the very opening scene, Chitra pronounces the lack of confidence to Madhana (the patron of Love) regarding her external, believing her manly features made her unattractive to the menfolk. She opines that the only way she could make a man fall in love with her would be if there was divine beauty and femininity.

CHITRA : Yes, that is why I am Dressed in man’s attire and have left the seclusion of a woman’s chamber. I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but I have never learnt Cupid’s archery, the play of eyes. ( *Chitra* 29)

These words reveal how women are made to believe that “feminine wiles” are more important to win male hearts. When Chitra first meets Arjuna of the Pandava clan, she longs to embody the stereotypical feminine ideals of beauty and love to win him. Tagore vividly depicts Chitra’s desperation over what she lacked. In her quest, she performs penance and wins a boon for temporary beauty and femininity to win Arjuna’s heart. Instead of a single day, the gods Madana (the god of love) and Vasanta (the god of eternal youth) grant her the gift for an entire year. Without realizing that borrowed feathers stay only for a short while, Chitra happily pursues her love.

However, Chitra soon experiences self-realization when Arjuna celebrates Chitra’s role of a dutiful princess and her rare valour. However Arjuna is ignorant that the woman he woos is the princess herself. She understands that her borrowed beauty was an illusion, and she felt guilty. In her journey of self-discovery, she recognizes the greater truth that her essential duty was not seeking happiness in the woods but rather in serving the country.

In scene IV, Chitra is being very practical and tells Arjuna her mind:

CHITRA: No. Never talk of that. Take to your home what is abiding and strong. Leave the little wild flower where it was born; leave it beautifully to die at the day’s end among all fading blossoms and decaying leaves. Do not take it to your palace hall to fling it on the stony floor which knows no pity for things that fade and are forgotten. ( *Chitra* 37)

Tagore points out that women should be left alone in order to realize their full potential rather allowing them no dignity or identity of their own. This transformation in Chitra signifies that she was becoming one like her ancestors and a true leader of Manipur.

CHITRA: That would be better far than this. 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* 36)

Instead of embracing a life of comfort as Arjuna’s wife, she informs him that she could not accompany him to his court merely as a decored flower. Tagore employs the metaphor of a wild flower to symbolize resilience: this image reflects the strength that arises naturally and unrestrained, similarly suggesting the inner freedom that blooms even in adverse conditions.

Arjuna’s words reflect the admiration of the people of Manipur for Princess Chitra’s rare combination of courage and compassion. He remarks: “They say that in valour she is a man, and a woman in tenderness” (Chitra 41). Through this statement, Tagore constructs an idealized image of Chitra, one that blends masculine strength with feminine grace (not wiles). His repeated praise for the princess’ bravery and his concern for the absence of Chitra in the kingdom highlights his respect for her leadership. However, Chitra, who is in disguise reassures Arjuna that the princess has not failed in her responsibility. She declares, “You need have no fear for them. Before she started on her pilgrimage, Princess Chitra had strong guards at all the

frontier passes" (Chitra 46). This assertion reflects Chitra's conscious affiliation towards her duties, even when hidden under the veil of another identity.

Eventually, Chitra comes to a profound realization. Inspired by Arjuna's words and sense of duty, she begins to understand the true meaning of her role as a princess which is not to merely gain love or admiration, but to serve and protect her people. Her inner transformation leads her to embrace both her human vulnerability and her royal responsibility, making her a complete and empowered individual.

In the concluding scene in *Chitra*, Tagore presents a powerful message about duty, identity, and self-realization. Chitra chooses to remain in her homeland rather than leave with Arjuna. She promises to send their son to him in the future but never suggests that they will go together. This decision highlights her deep sense of responsibility as a ruler and her commitment to her people. By setting aside personal happiness, she proves her strength not only as a woman but also as a dedicated leader. Tagore shows that real fulfillment comes when personal desires are get balanced with social commitment. The play ultimately promotes the idea that mutual respect, equality, and a strong sense of responsibility are essential in both love and leadership.

Tagore's play *The King and The Queen* is yet another play that stresses te responsibility of women in the political arena. It highlights the internal crisis faced by the country due to the king's failure to fulfill his responsibilities. The people are suffering, likely from famine, poverty, and misrule, yet the king, Vikram, is more focused on his personal comfort and royal pleasures. He remains distant from the real issues in the kingdom, showing little concern for the pain of his subjects. Tagore challenges the traditional belief that women must remain silent and submissive when the partner is around. Tagore presents Queen Sumitra as a strong and responsible leader who dares to take charge when the king fails to be proactive. While King Vikram indulges in luxury, Sumitra takes the responsibility of protecting the country from its enemies. She makes bold decisions for the welfare of the people, even if it means going against her husband and fighting her own family members. She sacrifices her personal happiness and royal status, proving that leadership and courage are not limited by gender.

VIKRAM: The King and The Queen? Mere names. We are more than that; we are lovers.

SUMITRA: You are my King, my husband, and I am content to follow your steps. Do not shame me by putting me before your kingship. (*The King and The Queen* 147-48)

Sumitra, with her great foresight, constantly reminds him that his love and attention should be towards the country and its people than courtly pleasures. From the very beginning, she proves her political commitment to the nation and fulfills her role as a wise and capable queen, when she sensitizes the king to perform his royal duties for the betterment of the kingdom.

SUMITRA: What shame is this. I must remove this refuse from my father's land and my people. Leave me now, the King comes. [Enters the King.] I am the mother of my people. I cannot bear their cry. Save them, King. (*The King and The Queen* 149-50)

When Sumitra learns about the country, she is deeply disappointed. She immediately urges the king to take appropriate action against the betrayers of the nation, though they were her cousins.

VIKRAM: Do you know who they are?

SUMITRA: Yes, I know.

VIKRAM: They are your own cousins.

SUMITRA: They are not a whit more my own than my people. They are robbers, who under the cover of your throne, seek for their victims. (*The King and The Queen* 150)

Tagore portrays Sumitra as a woman in sharp contrast with traditional depictions of women as merely compassionate, soft-hearted, and tender being far removed from battles and warfare. He breaks these stereotypical descriptions by showcasing Sumitra's political commitment. As queen, she wisely understands that even if her own cousins bring trouble, poverty, and hardship to the country, they must be considered enemies. She clearly conveys that if the choice is between her personal ties and her duty to the nation, she will always stand by her country.

DEVADATTA: Queen, they will not come.

SUMITRA: Then the King shall fight them.

DEVADATTA: The King will not fight.

SUMITRA: Then I will. (*The King and The Queen* 152)

Initially, her intention was to support and prepare the king for war, but when she realizes he is unwilling to fight for the country, she voluntarily steps forward to take charge.

VIKRAM: Where are you going?

SUMITRA: I am going to leave you.

VIKRAM: Leave me?

SUMITRA: Yes. I – am going to Fight the rebels.

VIKRAM: Woman, you mock me. (*The King and The Queen* 154)

Through her conversation with King Vikram, readers can understand that Sumitra is a brave woman who dares to fight for her country, regardless of the King's support. Her unwavering commitment to duty is evident when she chooses the people over her personal life. Ultimately, she fights against her enemies,

beheads her opponent, despite being gravely injured. On reporting about the victory to the King, she collapses and dies, having sacrificed everything for her kingdom.

Thus, these two heroines of Rabindranath Tagore, by breaking all the boundaries set for women, deconstruct the stereotyped roles assigned to women. By replacing the feminine stereotypes with his two heroines who overcome all fear, shame, pretence, and notions of chastity that were traditionally constructed in our society and in turn they are portrayed as revolutionary heroines with courage, wisdom, decision-making ability, and leadership qualities. Although the path and journey of these heroines are different, the destination they reach is the same. They are totally driven by political commitment towards their nation and people.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra* and *The King and the Queen* serve as powerful literary representations of women who transcend the traditional boundaries laid for women and embrace political responsibility and leadership. In both plays, the female protagonists Chitra and Sumitra undergo significant personal transformations that lead them to place their duties towards their people and kingdom above personal happiness or romantic love. Chitra, initially captivated by the illusion of beauty, finally understands her greater role as a protector and ruler of her land. Sumitra, on the other hand, rises in response to her husband's failure as a king and assumes the role of a decisive and courageous leader, sacrificing her own life for the sake of her people.

Through these characters, Tagore redefines the image of women in Indian literature not as passive or dependent figures, but as active agents of change capable of courage, intellect, and moral strength. These plays challenge patriarchal structures by illustrating how true leadership is not limited by gender. By giving political agency and heroic qualities to his female characters, Tagore not only critiques social norms but also envisions a more inclusive and equitable society. The political commitment of Chitra and Sumitra affirms that women are not only central to the private sphere but also essential to the public and political life of a nation. Ultimately, Tagore's vision in both plays highlights the importance of duty, self-realization, and sacrifice, while offering a feminist perspective that was far ahead of his time. His portrayal of women as rulers and protectors continues to inspire discussions on gender, leadership, and nationalism in both literature and society.

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