

**Research Article**

**Understanding Tagore’s Chitrangada in a Feminist Framework: A Tale of Glorification or Mortification?**

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**Abstract:** Rabindranath Tagore in his dance drama Chitrangada has recreated the anecdote of Chitrangada from Vyas’s epic Mahabharata. The opera happens to be one of finest musical masterpieces of Tagore. However, Tagore has used much liberty in the depiction of Chitrangada which may be justified as poetic freedom. However in his attempt to preach feminism and portray her as the epitome of empowerment, he has demeaned her at the same time. Vyas’s Chitrangada appears to be a stronger feminist than Tagore’s. While Vyas depicts her as an all-throughout bold, brave, just, empowered and an upright woman, Tagore too paints the same picture, but leads her into a journey from empowerment to temporary disillusionment that debases her original self. This does more harm than good to her image. However, in the end Tagore elevates not only her, but all women by preaching gender-equality and self-awakening through Chitrangada’s self-realization in the form of the song “Ami Chitrangada” (I am Chitrangada). Despite all the mortification, Tagore’s glorification of Chitrangada using the single song stands out in the drama and becomes the hallmark of feminism in Bengali literature.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Chitrangada, Rabindranath Tagore, Glorification, Mortification.

**INTRODUCTION**

Tagore has immortalized Chitrangada-- the Manipuri Princess and Arjuna’s wife in the minds of Bengali readers and audience. In fact, it would not be an audacious overstatement to claim that the Chitrangada prominent in Bengali minds traces her origin in Tagore’s dance drama ‘Chitrangada’ (1892) more than she does in Ved Vyasa’s epic, Mahabharata. This might be primarily because the various versions of Mahabharata mainly focus on the battle between the Kauravas and Pandavas and events unfolding this, while the episodes of Chitrangada, Ulupi and Subhadra are relegated to the background by Vyas himself, least to blame the other authors who have their own versions of the epic. An epic is bound to contain many other stories that the author deems necessary for the development of the main plots and characters, and princess Chitrangada is just one of them.

Tagore was very fond of North-East India. In fact, he had a deep connection with Tripura and Meghalaya. He therefore, seized the opportunity to narrate the tale of Manipuri princess to impart a feminist and philosophical approach to his audience. He tried to advocate empowerment of women through this dance drama. Tagore expanded the chronicle of Chitrangada from Mahabharata in a poignant style and profound sensitivity to lead the princess through a journey of self-discovery.

**Tagore’s Chitrangada**

Tagore’s dance drama Chitrangada is set against the backdrop of Manipur. The King of Manipur received a boon from Lord Shiva that his lineage will always be blessed with male heirs. Despite, a princess was born to him whom he christened Chitrangada and raised as a son. Chitrangada even dressed as a man and had hairy arms. She grew up like a Kshatriya king, learning the tactics of warfare and accuracy of archery. She received the knowledge of imparting justice and studied theories of politics. She grew up to take over the reins of her father’s kingdom in her hands.

The play unfolds at a time when Chitrangada was on a hunting spree with her friends and she unintentionally barged into Arjun, who was in Manipur to preserve and practice his vow of celibacy. Arjun mistook her for a boy which disturbed the princess immensely. She even invited Arjun into a duel and implored him to save her from the embarrassment of receiving his forgiveness for bumping into him. However, Arjun ignored her. This disturbed Chitrangada immensely as she discovered the woman in her and fell in love with mighty Arjun, but only to be refused.

Thereafter Chitrangada pleaded to the God of Love, Madan (Kaamdev) to bestow her with the finest of feminine attributes which would flare up the flame of lust in Arjun and make him accept Chitrangada as his consort. Madan obliged and her desires got fulfilled. She graduated from Kurupa (Ugly Chitrangada) to Surupa (Beautiful Chitrangada). Arjun’s got enchanted by Surupa and took her as his consort. But things remained rosy not for long. When Arjun learnt that Chitrangada was “as manly and valiant as a king and simultaneously as caring and affectionate as a mother” (translation, author), he fell in love with the real Chitrangada.

His realized the fallacy and transience of physical beauty and wished to meet the echt princess. Chitrangada too, decided to exfoliate the garb of falsehood and present herself in purity and truth before Arjun. Finally, Arjun accepted the princess in her pristine form and held her in equality in his own entity.

Tagore in this dance drama seems to have used his poetic freedom to a vast extent, sufficient enough to mould the actual story and gravity of Chitrangada's character only to propagate the philosophies of feminism and importance of inner beauty in contrast to external embellishment.

### **Masking Originality using Poetic Freedom**

Vyas's tale of Chitrangada stands in sharp contrast to Tagore's characterization. Tagore only seems to have borrowed the facts that Arjuna married Chitrangada during the time of his exile while he was supposed to practice the vow of celibacy and that Chitrangada had true Kshatriya fostering and ascribe. The rest is his original construct.

Let us focus on their first meeting. Tagore arranges Chitrangada's first encounter with Arjun while she was on a hunting spree and suddenly steps on sleeping Arjun. However, according to Vyas's depiction, Arjun first met Chitrangada while she was in the role of a justice, resolving a certain discord in her kingdom. This swayed Arjun off his feet. It was unprecedented in Arjun's eyes to behold a woman who has received the tutelage of judiciary and further, execute it with the finest perfection.

Arjun was more feminist than Chitrangada or her father in Vyas's Mahabharata. He was enamored by Chitrangada's valiance, power and strength of character. He immediately decided to marry her and approached her father with his proposal. Despite initial inhibition, Chitrangada's father assented, but on the condition that their son would be the heir to throne of Manipur and not Hastinapur. Arjun would exert no claim over him. This was Chitrangada's term of marriage as well. Contrast this with the dramatic, yet lyrical depiction of Tagore where Chitrangada had to win over Arjun's affection and lust using deceit.

Yet another discrepancy arises in Tagore's opera when Arjun introduces himself to the princess by claiming to be 'Gandibdhanya' or the possessor of Gandib which was the weapon of Lord Varun. However, Arjun had not received Gandib at the time he met Chitrangada. In fact, it was only after contriving with Lord Krishna when he went to Dwarka from Manipur, three years later, that the very desire to acquire Gandib was awakened by Krishna in Arjun's heart. The final possession of the weapon came much later. Tagore seems to have committed a serious error by confusing the sequence of events presented in Vyas's epic.

Next is the very attempt of Chitrangada to woo Arjun through falsehood and deceit that marks a large departure from the original text. In fact, Vyas had the opposite in mind and text. However, this departure allows Tagore to glorify as well demean Chitrangada simultaneously. The next section shall elaborate on this point.

In this context, it is noteworthy to mention that Tagore's Chitrangada had tried her best to woo Arjun and overcome his limitations to take her as his consort as he was on a vow of celibacy. This anecdote in Tagore's creation appears to be important for the lyrical construct and progress of the story. But it must be borne in mind that Arjun had no inhibition in giving himself to Chitrangada. To elucidate, Arjun was supposed to maintain celibacy for twelve years as he had breached a contract with Yudhishtir by foraging into the arsenal where Yudhishtir and Draupadi were engaged in coitus. To remain true to his word Arjun left his home and embarked a country-wide trip. However destiny had other plans. Ulupi, a widow and princess hailing from the kingdom of snakes fell for Arjun and won over him. It was actually Ulupi who had to try hard to convince Arjun to take her. She explained Arjun that celibacy according to the contract required Arjun to refrain himself from being physical with Draupadi alone. Ulupi was another progressive woman in Mahabharata. She in fact marked a revolution for two reasons. First, being a widow she chose to remarry—a practice not witnessed then. And secondly, she did not adhere to the social norm where the family chose a groom for the bride. She exerted her independence, intellect and wisdom to convince a learned and intellectual person, Arjun to marry her. Therefore, at the time Arjun met Chitrangada he actually is not supposed to have any inhibition for his vow. However, Tagore describes his inhibitions in the following words, "Forgive me. I am not capable of connubiality. Celibate I am" (translation, author).

In passing, it is important to note that Chitrangada in Vyas's story never metamorphosised herself to a pulchritudinous partner to win Arjun's affection and attention. Tagore on the contrary leads Chitrangada to journey from empowerment to disillusionment and then lead her back to square one, only to fulfill Arjun's wish. However, there is an indication in Vyas's epic that a slight change in attitude did come to her, though for a different reason which we shall explain in the next section. The character of Madan is a superficial construct of Tagore and has no significance in the original text.

### **Mortification and Glorification of Chitrangada**

Tagore in his attempt to glorify feminism through his portrayal of Chitrangada imparts great injustice to the original Chitrangada. Vyas's portrayal of Chitrangada is bolder than Tagore's. In fact, Tagore appears to be a pseudo feminist if likened to Vyas, who was a true feminist.

Let us elaborate. Chitrangada despite being raised as a boy never aspired to inculcate the feminine attributes. She was bold, capable, empower, brave, learned and perfect for a king, something which society never dared to imagine then and barely now. Tagore however compromised the strength of her character in his dance drama by making her adopt a semblance of chicanery to make her captivating. This adulteration does not bode well with her actual nature. Why should a woman like Chitrangada who has led her life on her own terms wish for a change in her physical attire out of sheer lust? Tagore makes Chitrangada surrender to her physical needs at the cost of the strength of her character and dignity, so much so that she evokes Madan, the God of Lust to cast a spell. Feminists and humanists do recognize the bodily needs of women. It is no offence, but rather perfectly natural for both men and women to have their rights to satiate their physical cravings. Thus, in Tagore's defence, it might initially appear acceptable to allow Chitrangada to adopt unfair means. However, the problem arises when Tagore sharply compromises the dignity of Chitrangada as is evident from the remarks of Surupa about Kurupa - "Boo Boo! She is unsightly. She is bereft of the beveled eyebrows unlike me. Nor do her eyes shine bright alike the sparkling stars. While she can easily coerce treaties on her foes, her arms are whiskered. She fails to move the hearts of valiant men with her crooked agile sneer. She is shameless and dauntless and lacks the grace of cruel yet beautiful banter. Her quiet postures do not echo the dalliance of sweet-rhythmic music" (translation, author).

It is a pity that Surupa insults her former self and gives no credit to virtues like valiance, strength, uprightness, empowerment and justice. It is evident that Surupa attaches importance to physical beauty alone, as in this state she has received what she was denied until Arjun's advent in her life, which is best described in Arjun's words after he lays his eyes on Surupa, "Oh beautiful damsel, my vow of celibacy accepts defeat to my unleashed youth.... Come my lady; let our adventurous love traverse the terrains never charted before" (translation, author). Therefore, it is evident that Tagore demeans Chitrangada by reducing her status from a valiant princess to a mere consort of a brave king.

One often wonders at the boldness of Vyas's depiction of Chitrangada. Chitrangada in Vyas's Mahabharata had the audacity to dictate terms to Arjun, the bravest warrior of the country, whose name and fame had surpassed even the tallest mountain. Chitrangada was clear about her wants. She wanted a son who would be the bravest in the universe and therefore the best heir to the throne of Manipur. She jolly well knew that her son from Arjun would be most suitable heir to the throne, and this is the only reason why she relented to marry; and not out of sheer bodily desires as depicted by Tagore. Further she compelled Arjun to accept a sort of pre-nuptial agreement whereby, he would not have any authority or right over his future son from Chitrangada, who in turn would be

future king of Manipur, and not Hastinapur. This pre-nuptial agreement is perhaps the first of its kind in the globe and it takes great boldness for a woman to offer one to a man in Dwapar Yug. One becomes simply amazed at Chitrangada's guts, confidence, clarity and brawn. Chitrangada was unique in the epic. She always stood upright for truth, justice as well as for her wants. These virtues are not well reflected in Tagore's text. Thus, Vyas's depiction of Chitrangada is undoubtedly stronger than Tagore's. Tagore actually mortifies Chitrangada in his vain attempt to glorify the philosophy about the transience of physical beauty.

To delve deeper into Vyas's epic, Arjun leaves Chitrangada at the very moment she becomes pregnant with his child, Badrubahan. Arjun does not even stand a chance to behold the face of his newborn. However, in his previous marriage, he left Ulupi only after their son Iravan was born. Arjun knew that if he stayed any longer, he would develop paternal emotions. Thus, he left Manipur, but only to marry Subhadra now.

Therefore, we see that Chitrangada in Vyas's epic is a much stronger personality than Tagore's. She stood for gender equality in the truest sense, unlike the one in Tagore's who is flawed and disillusioned. Tagore's drive to lead Chitrangada-Arjun through a journey of disillusionment followed by self-realization is only aesthetically relevant. The lyrical and mellifluous garland of songs that depicts the ordeals of the duo in the dance drama is undoubtedly relevant from the view point of entertainment and literature. However, it debases Chitrangada.

Tagore in his dance drama once again brings to the fore that physical beauty is only transient, and what matters is inner beauty and strength of character. Thus Surupa realized her fault and she ventured to amend her mistake by invoking Madan once again to return her, her original self. She is convinced that Arjun would happily accept the valiant but ugly Chitrangada. She therefore pleaded Madan, "...Please take back your spell and disengage me from the false web of deceit. Awaken me to the eternal truth and allow me offer the stolen treasures of beauty at your Divine Feet....May the veil of knavery fall off along with my disillusioned dream" (translation, author). To this, Madan assented in the following words, "Let love in its purest avidity surface in its triumphant chariot. Let the eyes of the ardent lover behold eternal beauty concealed in the deep nook of one's soul. Let the veil of enthrallment slide off from the eyes of the lover" (translation, author). Perhaps in order to teach this lesson Tagore makes Chitrangada pass through all the ordeals that severely compromise on her character. Tagore fails to portray Chitrangada as an upright and empowered entity all throughout, unlike Vyas.

However, Chitrangada's transformation in Tagore's text can be comprehended in broader perspective. Mahabharata hints at Chitrangada's inability to conceive post marriage, which made her a bit soft and molly in nature.

The epic mentions that the conjugal life between them spanned for three years after which Arjun left for Dwarka.

Thus, it implies that Chitrangada conceived after three years of marriage- a time which is considered huge for women to conceive in those days. Contrast this with the agreement between the Pandavas that each would get to have a conjugal life with Draupadi for one year. The stipulated time frame has been agreed upon by bearing in mind that Draupadi would conceive each of the Pandava's children and also give birth within that time frame, before she ventured out to her next partner. Read in this light, it is an indication that Chitrangada's desire to have a valiant son from Arjun was not easily met. This softened her nature as per the epic. This also means a transformation whereby Chitrangada received an opportunity to inculcate the finer aspects of womanhood, which she evaded until then. This hurdle further added a feather to her cap by transforming her to a more accomplished personality whereby she actually became "as valiant as a king and as affectionate as a mother" (translation, author). Therefore, Tagore's use of the verse "as manly and valiant as a king and simultaneously as caring and affectionate as a mother" in describing Chitrangada is though misfit in the context in which he used in describing original Chitrangada, it can be interpreted in the larger context of the epic. Moreover this transformation was a permanent one since Chitrangada resigned from her kingdom after meeting Arjun once again after the battle of Kurukshetra drew close, and dedicated her life as a maid to Arjun's aunt, Gandhari; but only after Badrubahan ascended the throne. Not only has this spoken high of her dedication, but also of her responsibility to her kingdom and son.

Tagore's philosophy of ascendance from lower self (Surupa) to higher self (Kurupa) is well established in the dance drama, whereby Chitrangada realized that beauty is only skin deep and further, what matters is gender equality, dignity and strength. The bard poignantly brings forth the urgency of self-awakening in women as well as in men. A woman should first earn respect in her own eyes before she can aspire to be respected by society. Tagore finally fixes his error and kindles the flame of truth and realization through his very famous song in the drama, "Ami Chitrangada" which is translated below.

"I am Chitrangada, the quintessential princess of Manipur.  
I am neither a goddess, nor an insignificant-pitiful woman.  
I desire neither a place in your sacred altar to be worshipped  
and held in high esteem,  
Nor to be treated by you in utter neglect and despise.  
If you hold me beside you in your hours of crisis and success,  
And allow me to embark the most difficult mission in life  
By being your true accomplice,  
Then only shall you recognize my true essence and spirit.  
This is my only desire today.  
I am Chitrangada, the quintessential princess of Manipur"  
(translation, author).

This song has all the element sufficient to glorify any woman who has realizes her worth. Women's role in Tagore's time was mainly relegated to the background and they were severely dependant on men for their survival and even their identity at large. Tagore was a critic of this social

norm. He did not approve of a timid, dependent and dumb woman. She always believed in their enlightenment. This is evident from the plethora of his works. He attempted to build Chitrangada as an independent, powerful, bright and brave woman. However, in order to render poetic justice to his dance drama, he leads her through a journey where she loses herself in the mist of disillusionment and bodily desires. This marks the greatest departure from original Chitrangada, as depicted by Vyas. However to reposition her in all her dignity and might, Tagore uses the aforementioned song of self-awakening. This song is perhaps the best description of any celebrated or uncelebrated woman. It asks why woman should not be held equally in society. Why should a woman need to be revered for her feminine role as our holy scriptures suggest or why should a woman be ill-treated as patriarchy preaches. The true identity of a woman is best discovered when she is given a position and rank equal to that of man. She is capable and therefore, not supposed to be seen as the weaker sex. She too can go through all the ordeals that a man is supposed to face due to his societal role. When Chitrangada asserts that she is equal to Arjun, she reminds Tagore's audience that gender-equality does not demand charity from men. It is a woman's right.

This is the best glorification that Tagore had to offer Chitrangada. Here Chitrangada's identity becomes every woman's identity, her unspoken words- she is neither inferior nor superior to men, but equal in all aspects. Had Tagore not uttered these golden words through Chitrangada's mouth and ended the drama with Chitrangada regaining her original self at Arjun's behest, the drama would have reduced Chitrangada to a mere slave whose primary objective would be to keep her spouse happy and contended, sans any spine and dignity. This song gives the best feminist touch to the drama.

## CONCLUSION

Tagore's Chitrangada is vastly different from Vyas's Chitrangada. While Vyas depicts her as a bold, brave, just and upright persona, Tagore too paints the same picture, but leads her through a journey from where she suffers from temporary disillusionment. In the journey that the bard leads her through, he does more damage than good to her character only to provide a feminist and philosophical aspect to his dance drama. However, in the end, Tagore uplifts her dignity and position by preaching gender-equality.

The song "Ami Chitrangada" as outlined before comes as a savior to Tagore whereby he could elevate her to the status of a truly liberated, awakened and capable woman.

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