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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Tagore's Chitra, Prakriti and Shyama – Cases of Macrocosm in A *Microcosm*

**Mr. Surajit Sen**

Lecturer, Department of English and Soft Skills,  
Faculty of Management  
ICFAI University Meghalaya  
Handers Building, Lummawrie,  
P.O. Laitumkhrach,  
Shillong – 793 003,  
Meghalaya,  
INDIA.

### **Abstract:**

As a humanist, Gurudev Tagore sought to serve the humanity. As a visionary, he saw through the deeds of humans and tried to bring in a change in the order. Having seen the condition of the Indian women, Tagore felt that the only way for them to overcome their problems was through educating not them, but educating the milieu. The paper focuses on three immortal women characters who are idiosyncratically so dissimilar yet so similar in their womanhood. They dynamically play humanizing roles from their microcosmic world for us to understand in a macrocosmic way. As their life is enlarged, a realization dawns that theirs is a macrocosmic view towards all that is realistic and naturalistic. They teach us lessons worth to be learnt and put to practice for the good of humanity in general.

**Key Words:** love, untouchability, femininity, women emancipation

### **Introduction:**

The human world is a complex variation of the multi-faceted yet intertwined hidden linkages. The diasporic differences or rather the similarities, if any, only go on to enhance the ethos of all that is generic. Criticisms to life and that of life are part of cosmic creation. The society, polity and economy create and recreate, generate, degenerate and regenerate. Within this gamut, falls in religion, ethnicity, class, caste, gender and occupation. They define and continue to redefine the same self society, polity and economy. They are but the multiple spokes of a crafty wheel called 'life'.

Gurudev Tagore is a humanist. His humanism is not just for the service of humanity but perhaps what can be termed as greater humanity and supreme humanity. Being a visionary, he could envision the purpose of the world and the humans who live in it. His Ananda possibly sums up his humanistic philosophy when he says, "Je manob ami, shei manob tumi" ("The human which I am, the same are you" – *Translation Mine*) (*Chandalika: 1937*). As an educationist, he sought to concretize this vision through his works, be it literary or other forms of fine art.

Tagore had seen the plight of the Indian women and was perhaps the herald to champion their cause. More than educating them of their problems and issues, Tagore took upon himself the onus of educating the milieu. Unless the society is erudite and freed of its evil customary traditions, good and scientific though at times some are, women cannot ameliorate their positions. They must themselves be first aware of their predicaments and concerns. In

his essay *Nari (Women)*, Tagore implores the women to come out of the four walls of their mansion in pursuit of education and intellectual enhancement stressing the need for their self development. Tagore's dance dramas invigorate the same essence. His female protagonists are a proof of the importance shown by him for their emancipation.

Call them Prakriti, Chitra or Shyama, they are but different shades of the same form. They stress on class, caste, gender, religion, love and unrequited love, possessive longing, beauty, obsession, necromancy, human drama, freedom, self expression, crime and punishment, and so on. It is through their understanding of these concepts that Tagore educates and upholds their dignity.

### Sources:

The sources of information are the texts of the three dance-dramas written by Tagore – *Chitrangada* (1914), *Chandalika* (1937) and *Shyama* (1939).

*Chitrangada* is based on the epic *Mahabharata*. Arjun has taken a vow of twelve years' celibacy and is leading life of hermit traversing through the forests and different countries. During this period, he enters Manipur. Chitra, the princess of Manipur, has been raised as a boy as her father had no male heir. Chitra falls in love with Arjun, who refuses to accept her proposal or even look at her in her man's attire or manly features. She begs for perfect beauty to the God of Love, Madana and the God of Springtime and eternal youth, Vasanta. The Gods grant her beauty for one full year. In her vision of a new found loveliness and perfect grace, Arjun helplessly falls in love with her and breaks his vow of celibacy. They spend one year in joy and dalliance. However, Arjun becomes upset and yearns to meet Chitra, whom the villagers say is their savior. He wishes for a woman like Chitra as a companion. With the one year coming to an end, Chitra reveals her true self and Arjun accepts her at her terms.

*Chandalika* is based on a Buddhist legend. Ananda, a Buddhist monk stops one hot day and asks Prakriti, an untouchable girl, for water. His kind words make her attracted towards him. She feels he is the one who can rescue her from her present position. Ananda makes her realize her human worth. She yearns for the man who has transformed her and persuades her mother to work the primordial spell upon Ananda so that he would be forced to come to the hut of Prakriti. The spell works, but at the same time it has caused a hideous change on his countenance. Prakriti is shocked to see and begs her mother to break the spell. Ananda is released from the spell and the mother dies of expiation. Prakriti is filled with remorse. Falling at the feet of Ananda, she begs for forgiveness. The monk and Prakriti are saved from sin at the last moment by the grace of Lord Buddha.

*Shyama*, originally titled *Parishod*, tells the story of a noble merchant, Bajrasen, acquiring a priceless necklace studded with precious stones, which he intends not to trade but to give to the girl whom he thinks could be his suitable bride. Soon he is chased by the royal guards on charge of theft. The royal guards arrest him, though he is falsely accused of theft. Shyama, who was present near the scene of Bajrasen's arrest, along with her friends, falls in love with Bajrasen and is unable to see him handcuffed. Shyama is extremely beautiful is pursued by many suitors, but her heart sets on Bajrasen. She devices a plan to save him, by manipulating one of her suitors, Uttiyo, to take the blame of the crime for which Bajrasen has been arrested. Bajrasen is saved and Uttiyo is killed. Shyama and Bajrasen elope to a land where none know them. Meanwhile, Bajrasen is curious to know how Shyama rescued him. She tells him that he was freed because of Uttiyo's sacrifice. Heartbroken, Bajrasen leaves her to suffer from the heinous crime she committed only to be forgiven by the Almighty.

**The Characters:**

Chitra is a warrior princess whose pursuit of love is an intriguing search for femininity. Prakriti is an untouchable maiden who tries to break the shackles of casteism in search of love. Shyama is a court dancer torn between prejudice and sacrifice in quest of love. Chitra means Bright. Shyama means Dark. Together they form Prakriti - the Natural World. They are women who face universal and timeless challenges.

**They, Their Sphere:**

Chitra is tom boyish. Hence, she is easily overlooked by the handsome Arjun when she first goes to propose him. Even when she puts on the woman's attire, Arjun rejects her saying that he had taken a vow of celibacy and is, therefore, unfit to be her husband. But he immediately breaks his vow when Chitra reappears in the form of a divine beauty, blessed by the Gods Madana and Vasanta. She is a warrior and like a warrior she has conquered Arjun's heart and has made a man surrender his merit at her feet. Even though she has Arjun now, yet an internal conflict ravages her. She is not able to accept the manly nature being covered in an illusory veil of a beautiful form. She is very much aware of her falsehood. She fights a battle with herself. She feels that her new appearance has become more of curse and follows her like a demon which is robbing her off of all her pleasures of love. Her body becomes her own rival. Bravely, she tries to return her boon of beauty and charm, as she knows what could be the consequences of her deceit. Nevertheless, with the boon not taken back, Chitra is now for self-consummation. She knows her beauty and charm is for a limited span. Hence, she wishes to enjoy every moment of her new incarnation. She goads, coaxes and forces Arjun to accept her. Chitra is a man and a woman at the same time to her parents, to her subjects and to Arjun. She tries to reason out that man is always in pursuit of beauty, and if perchance she loses her charm, no Arjun will ever deign to look at her. As a warrior, she fights a raging battle within herself. She stands the acid test of her life and reveals her true self more valiantly than a woman could have perhaps done. She could do so because she is, at once, both a man and a woman. Her womanly virtues do not cover up her manly courage. She is not afraid of calling a spade a spade. In her pride, call it manly or womanly, she says that she is not an object of common pity which can be ignored with indifference like that of a moth. At last Arjun accepts her in the form she is and says that his life has attained true meaning with her presence.

Prakriti fears nothing except one – the fear of reversing into the self same mode of being lost in darkness and losing the newly found meaning to her life. She bravely announces, that she is Prakriti who is neither a slave nor a 'Chandal' (untouchable), in opposition to the societal norms. She is a rebel who fears not even the Gods. She says in defiance that a God who distinguishes between humans is no God. She is scathing in her remark when she says that men have conspired to make her God evil. She is right when she says so. It is the humans living here who have created the distance and difference between man and man, and man and God. She poses simple yet thought provoking questions – why cannot one man mix with the other? why cannot a man worship his God? Overtly, Prakriti talks of the Hindu Varna System and the time when masses adopted Buddhism to get rid of the rigidity of Brahmanism. To her, the monk, a Buddhist, will redeem her. However, it is her hurt ego which forces her to goad her mother to commit the sin of using necromancy. She is of the opinion that since Ananda showed no pity for her, so she would show none to him. Call it her childish foolishness or her ego hurt in unrequited love, she refuses to listen to her mother's warning about the use of magic. Undoing the magic could cost the mother's life. But Prakriti wants

Ananda to pass through the punishment for not coming to her. It is her way to seek vengeance. Her hope is that ultimately Ananda will save her and she will in turn save her mother. On seeing the monk, in the magical mirror, going through the terrible and painful ordeal of transformation, she wavers for a while to change her opinion and stop the magic. But she is unable to control her desire. She wants him. Hence, she does not allow her mother to stop the spell. Her ego strikes her once again. When her mother asks her of how long should the horrifying ordeal drag on, Prakriti replies haughtily that it should continue till her suffering is soothed. She feels that Ananda cannot be freed so long as she is not. But at last, her feminine emotions and senses make her feel afraid to look into the magical mirror. Though she realizes her act as insensible and unrealistic, yet she would not accept it. But the ending tells it all: every sin has a suffering, the suffering has a cause, and the cause is desire which can be destroyed by the supreme knowledge – here the tenets of Buddhism.

Shyama is a narcissist. Drunk in the glory of her own beauty and pride, she notices not the appreciation of the love of any of her admirers. She tries to stay aloof from the feelings of the young Uttiyo. That would have caused no tension in her life for the love of Uttiyo is unilateral. It becomes a matter of concern when she uses and plays with Uttiyo's sentiments to get her work done. She is eager to release Bajrasen, a foreigner, accused of burglary. Shyama, in love with Bajrasen, seeks help from Uttiyo, who gives his own life to fulfill Shyama's request. Thus, Bajrasen is saved. However, looking at this entire episode from another perspective, Shyama seems to be an articulate manipulator. She masters in the art of manipulation in the name of love. Else, Uttiyo would not have to sacrifice his life. No doubt, there is foolishness on the part of Uttiyo, yet a man in love finds all in utter darkness. If love is not reciprocated then what is the use of staying alive and keep loving? May be in the futuristic world their souls could get united. But all these happen because of temptation. It is the root cause here. Bajrasen would not have been confined had it not been for the royal household wanting to take procession of the precious necklace called 'Indramonir Haar'. Uttiyo would not have sacrificed himself had the temptation of meeting Shyama eternally not been there. Shyama would not have been 'Shyama' had she not been tempted in love to save Bajrasen. Upon the dawn of realization and knowledge with Shyama's confession about the release of Bajrasen, the latter rejects her as a sinful woman. But the urgency of Shyama's unrequited desire and self determinism comes forcefully when she tells Bajrasen that she had not wronged him. If she is a sinner then she is a sinner in front of God and if God is angry and wishes to punish her for her deeds then she would silently accept it. She further tells Bajrasen that if he does not sympathize with her, she would not be able to tolerate it any more. Bajrasen uses violence against her for her sin and forgets that the same Shyama who loves him still had rescued him from death by sacrificing Uttiyo. Shyama remains loyal to him even though Bajrasen repulses and rejects her so harshly. She is brave and does not shirk from or hesitate to acknowledge her own desires. She is a radical figure, self conscious of her choice. At the same time, Shyama retains her dignity till the end.

### **The Experience:**

The Bengali Renaissance brought about a new orientation towards women in society. Various movements like widow remarriage, abolition of Sati, abolition of child marriage were direct fallouts of the writings of the period. This brought about initiatives which were taken for women's education and the view of the society towards women and her life in the family underwent serious changes.



Through his writings, Tagore sought to find out the causes and suggest remedies for us to find about women and their maturation towards selfhood.

Was being tomboyish Chitra's fault? Her parents wanted a son. By the blessings of Lord Shiva, her family could have only one child. Her father wanted an heir to his throne. Hence, he made her a means to see the throne secured. Was Prakriti wrong in her decision? She has just fallen in love with her redeemer. All that she wanted is the man who redeemed her and gave her a new identity to be with her always. Was Shyama unjust in sending Uttiyo to the gallows? Uttiyo knew he could never get Shyama's love for Shyama never loved him.

They all wronged because of society and its mores. The society has made them all untouchable in one form or the other. Chitra becomes untouchable in her man's attire and behaviour. Prakriti becomes an untouchable by birth and order, which is a creation of the society. Shyama becomes untouchable in sacrificing an innocent for another's life. They are all filled with regret and remorse, but the society sees it not. Chitra regrets that she has to take a false role to woo Arjun. Prakriti regrets that she has committed a sin by going against the laws of society, nature and order. Shyama is regretful at making Uttiyo suffer. She goes to the royal guards and begs him to be released for it was her childish thought to have brought about the situation. But the guards, being men, shun her away.

Hence, whatever they do is only a way, perhaps, to escape from the world and its norms, so rigidly made for them.

### **Conclusion:**

Chitra, Prakriti and Shyama should be seen as cases for women emancipation and amelioration throughout the country. Till today in different parts of the world, some Chitra is born to sacrifice her feelings for her parents. A Prakriti is there to fight the odds of the hideous class and caste system. And a Shyama is born to be shunned and hated by the one she loves. Their microcosmic lives thus become macrocosmic.

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