

Behind The Armours of Identity: A Comparative Study of Chitra and Shikhandi in The Select Works of Rabindranath Tagore and Jean-Claude Carrière

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Abstract

In mythology and classical literature, women have been frequently relegated to positions of modesty, obedience, moral purity, or attractiveness, shaped mainly by male-coded expectations. Some characters challenge these limits by embracing cultivated identities and maneuvering through roles aligned with masculinity. Hence, with a comparative framework, the present study aims to explore the characters ‘Chitra’ and ‘Shikhandi’ in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chitra: A Play in One Act* and Jean-Claude Carrière’s *The*

Mahabharata: A Play respectively, who travel on the same boat, and to highlight a common thread that binds their narrative of life. Although both characters take root in distinct narrative traditions, they showcase notable similarities in their challenging gender roles and their reactions to societal and familial expectations. Both characters face the same circumstances and situations that push them to change their outlook, either intentionally or unintentionally, and opt for male attire to achieve the same motive: to safeguard their kingdom under their father’s wish. Though they have entirely different climaxes, they follow the same path of life, transformation, and identity struggle. Through examining their transformative arcs, shifting from identity struggles to instances of empowerment, this paper brings to light how both women represent resilience, signifying strength not only physically but also in their mental deviance against prescribed societal roles.

Keywords: Self-Discovery, Celibacy, Identity Struggle, Women Warriors, Gender Transformation.

Introduction

It is a well-established truth that mythology has consistently mirrored the ethical, cultural, and societal constructs of civilizations throughout history. These narratives, deeply embedded in cultural memory, often reinforce rigid gender roles—portraying men as rulers and warriors while relegating women to roles defined by obedience, modesty, or beauty. However, within these same mythological frameworks exist characters who defy traditional norms and embody resistance. Among such figures are Chitra and Shikhandi—mythic individuals from two distinct texts who challenge binary definitions of gender and identity. This article undertakes a comparative exploration of Chitra from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chitra* and Shikhandi from Jean-Claude Carrière’s *The Mahabharata: A Play*. By tracing their personal journeys through rejection, transformation, and self-realization, the paper seeks to reveal how both characters emerge as emblems of resilience, redefining power and femininity within patriarchal epic traditions.

I. Celibacy and Rejection: The Moment of Refusal in Chitra and Shikhandi

In Tagore's *Chitra: A Play in One Act*, Arjuna's oath of celibacy acts as the mental trigger that drives Chitra into a crisis regarding her sense of self-doubt. When Arjuna turns down her affection, putting forth his spiritual commitment, Chitra is driven into a state of emotional disarray. Having been raised amidst swords and strategy, distanced from traditional notions of femininity, Chitra begins to believe she lacks the softness and appeal that Arjuna might be seeking. This self-perceived flaw drives her to turn to divine forces for transformation. She approaches Madana, the deity of desire, and Vasanta, the spirit of rejuvenation, to ask for an outer form that could match the cultural idea of womanhood. The divine gift that she receives, grants her a fleeting version of beauty, designed to draw Arjuna's attention. However, this enchanted change questions the line between outer illusion and inner truth. The emergence is not just a more beautiful version of herself but a crafted identity, constructed in response to emotional denial. In the end, Arjuna's personal restraint becomes the indirect cause of Chitra's inward and outward change, raising the enduring question of how far a woman must go or transform in order to be acknowledged, loved, and accepted within a patriarchal world.

Similarly, in *The Mahabharata: A Play*, Bhishma's promise of celibacy serves as the driving force for Amba's relentless agony. When he declines to marry her due to this pledge, Amba is left disgraced and forsaken; thus, her destiny derailed by a decision rooted in obligation rather than compassion. This dismissal not only dismantles her social standing but also wounds her soul, driving her to end her life and return in another form as Shikhandi, a vessel of retribution whose very purpose is to challenge Bhishma's legacy.

Across both stories, the celibacy of male characters, while portrayed as honorable or ascetic, inadvertently inflicts deep psychological trauma upon the women they reject. These personal convictions, upheld in the name of virtues, become mechanisms to either reshape themselves for acceptance, as Chitra does, or rebel against the very system, as seen with Shikhandi.

II. Duel's Journey: The Birth and Growth

Chitra's unconventional upbringing stemmed from her father Chitravahana's desire for a male heir, leading him to raise her as a boy. As a result, Tagore portrays Chitra as a strong, brave, and fearless lady. She was given a male attire. Though her body was covered with manly clothes, they failed to hide her feminine touch. This could be seen through the following lines.

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. (Tagore, Scene I)

She makes it strong to change her lifestyle for her unending love and passion towards Arjuna. She pleases the two gods, Madana, the god of Love, and Vasanta, the God of Spring and Eternal youth, borrows voluptuous beauty for one day but is granted it for one year.

Shikhandi, originally born as Shikhandini, was the daughter of King Durupada of Panchala. The king chose to bring up Shikhandini as a boy and train her as a warrior since Lord Shiva had promised him for a son. But Shikhandini never liked the femininity that she had into her.

So, she trained and developed herself physically and mentally into a strong man.

They both had similar aims in their lives to safeguard the kingdom because both were into manhood for the only reason of lacking a prince or male heir to rule the dynasty of Manipur and Panchala.

III. Rebirth: Tale of Romance and Revenge

Both the characters had a rebirth in their lives. Chitra gets a rebirth or transformation into a breathtaking beauty, which was a blessing from two goddesses, Madana and Vasanta, because she believes that her physical appearance is not attractive, and she thinks that being beautiful would enhance her chance of love or acceptance from Arjuna. On the contrary, Shikhandi, she had her literal

rebirth after Bhishma, disagreed with her proposal because of his tough vow to never marry and to remain celibate. This made Amba (Shikhandi in a previous birth) furious and she then proceeded to do a severe penance. As she declares in *The Mahabharata: A Play*:

Yes, I too pronounce a vow: in one of the worlds, I will find your executioner. There's now on this earth a woman who will always think of you. Never forget me, Bhishma. I am your death (Jean-Claude Carrière, Part I). Happy with her penance, the God gave her a garland that, in that era, was so respected and dreaded by those who could kill him that no man would consent to wear it. Just as women could not call Bhishma to battle, Amba herself was unable to employ it. Amba hung the garland on the door of King Durupada's palace before dying, and this made King perform Yaga and father three children. One among them was Shikhandini, and later she claimed manhood from Yaksha. She made her rebirth as Shikhandini for quenching her revenge on Bhishma.

IV. Beyond Armor: Believing Male Attire as The Guardian of a Kingdom

This comparative analysis reveals that behind both the characters and their life stories, it revealed that the characters themselves and their fathers believed that giving them a man's attire and raising them like a man only could safeguard their kingdom and would bring them power and pride, as Chitra admits, "it was my father who brought me up like a son" (Tagore, Scene I). Because of historical patriarchal systems and the notion that men were more fit for positions of leadership, many nations prized male successors. Sons were considered the heirs to the family line, delegating to them the traditions and the inheritance of power. Perceptions of males' capacity for territory expansion and defense were also influenced by their physical strength. Different civilizations and eras had different cultural norms.

These beliefs influenced both the characters to think that adopting a male persona was the only way to gain power. Chitra, persuaded that she could only control the realm in masculine disguise, suppressed her inner femininity, an underlying gift she so desired to embrace. Similarly, societal conventions caused Shikhandini to feel that changing her gender to Yaksha or presenting herself as Shikhandi was the only option to overcome Bhishma. However, what went unnoticed was that true power rests not in changing one's gender, but in having the bravery and conviction to question gender norms. Both, even their female incarnations, were capable of accomplishing their objectives.

V. Victory: Parallel Triumph with Different Climaxes

Both characters achieve their aims in distinct yet meaningful ways. Chitra, for instance, overcomes her insecurities and embraces her true self. Her aim is achieved not through external accomplishments but by discovering inner strength and self-acceptance. The climax unfolds as she realizes the power of her own identity, transcending societal expectations and finding fulfillment within, thus marking a personal victory that redefined traditional notions of feminine worth. She achieves her aim externally by winning Arjuna's love for her as her true self. As she declares,

I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side on 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 (Tagore, Scene VI).

On the other hand, Shikhandi achieves her victory but has an extremely varied climax compared to Chitra. Shikhandi, who was born a woman but subsequently underwent a male transformation, plays a crucial role in the battle. Shikhandi confronts the strong grandfather

Bhishma, who had vowed not to battle a woman, with the help of Lord Krishna. Arjuna uses Shikhandi as his focal point during the fight, taking advantage of the chance to shoot arrows through Bhishma. In order to achieve the strategic goal of neutralizing Bhishma, Shikhandi appears on the Warfield

which helped the Pandavas to win in the battle. But both had a similar way of enjoying their success: winning over the man Chitra liked (Arjuna) and winning over a man Shikhandi hated (Bhishma).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the parallel narratives of Chitra and Shikhandi emphasize how societal notions of gender and authority drive individuals to redefine their identities not solely out of choice, but due to circumstance and cultural influence. Shikhandi's metamorphosis is lasting, by the tormenting recollection of Amba's rejection. Though their lives differs, one deeprooted in love and the other in vengeance, they reach the common goal: empowerment through self-realization. Their journey reveals that authentic strength comes not based on their gender, but from reclaiming one's rightful place in a world that often marginalizes individuals who challenge traditions. In their individual stories, both individuals add to the complex literary tapestry.

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