

**THE WOMAN'S VOICE: DISSENT OR ACQUIESCENCE?**  
**QUEST FOR LOVE, FREEDOM AND HARMONY**  
**AS DEPICTED IN TAGORE'S CHITRA AND**  
**VOLGA'S SWETCHA**

**PRABHAVATI Y.**  
GITAM UNIVERSITY  
HYDERABAD, INDIA

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**Abstract**

*The paper explores the woman's quest for love, freedom and harmony through Rabindranath Tagore's one act play Chitra and a Telugu novel, Swetcha, written by Volga (pen name of Popuri Lalitha Kumari). Tagore's lyrical play written in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1914) is seen as an unobtrusive assault on established social norms inimical to the progress of women. Volga's novel written in late 20<sup>th</sup> century (1987) kicked up a huge controversy by challenging the establishment through a bold portrayal of women who are not simplistic but complex, with many layers to their personalities. In both the works the protagonist's love is not for the person that the man represents, but for the affirmation of her own self as one equal to his in all respects.*

*The strong and unorthodox characters of Chitra and Aruna show the woman's ability to endure. The paper focuses on how these two works depict the falsifications that a woman is forced to succumb to, as well as the social conditioning that circumscribes her existence while she endeavours to cross the limits set by patriarchy. The paper expresses the belief that the woman's voice is neither of dissent nor of acquiescence; rather it expresses her innate desire to protect and preserve her Self.*

**Key words:** *Woman's quest – strong, unorthodox characters – innate desires protect and preserve the Self*

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# THE WOMAN'S VOICE: DISSENT OR ACQUIESCENCE? QUEST FOR LOVE, FREEDOM AND HARMONY AS DEPICTED IN TAGORE'S CHITRA AND VOLGA'S SWETCHA

- PRABHAVATI Y.

Rabindranath Tagore's one act play *Chitra* and, *Swetcha*, a Telugu novel, written by Volga (pen name of Popuri Lalitha Kumari) both explore the woman's quest for love, freedom and harmony. The focus is on the constant struggle of the woman to find a point of convergence between tradition and individuality even as she tries to assert herself as a person who thinks independently and does not limit herself to the role of a daughter/sister/wife/mother. The protagonists of the two books are especially relevant in the context of women in India and other Asian countries trying to establish their identity while coping with the pressures of changing value systems in a highly westernized society.

Tagore's lyrical play written in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1914) is seen as an unobtrusive assault on established social norms inimical to the progress of women. Volga's novel written in late 20<sup>th</sup> century (1987) kicked up a huge controversy by challenging the establishment through a bold portrayal of women who are not simplistic but complex, with many layers to their personalities. These two works are juxtaposed to bring out the fact that love is not just an emotion but a strong motivating force that shapes a woman's life. In both the works the protagonist's love is not for the person that the man represents, but for the affirmation of her own self as one equal to his in all respects; it is her search for love that goes beyond the physical and emotional bonds of need/gratitude and enters a higher plane.

Tagore brings out certain interesting facets of the woman in his portrayal of 'Chitra'. Volga has stirred a hornet's nest when she wrote *Swetcha* that depicts the everyday struggle of an ordinary middle class educated woman in India as she tries to find her place in this male dominated society. Aruna, the

protagonist does not desire unrestricted freedom without responsibility but realizes that in freedom lies a greater responsibility and does not hesitate to shoulder that responsibility. She only longs for the freedom to carve out her own destiny. These two books have great contemporary relevance especially because of the optimism that shines through the complex expression of external and internal conflicts faced by women. They depict the woman's struggle to establish her identity and maintain her dignity in the face of patriarchal oppression and politics of power.

Tagore's heroine, Chitra, and Volga's Aruna are beautiful women who are warriors and champions of causes. They also embody the feminine virtues of delicacy, grace, modesty and sacrifice. Their genius and originality, courage and strength are at times perceived as accidental or perhaps even masculine. It is heartening to note that Tagore is neither moralistic nor judgmental. These characters raise certain pertinent questions— about whether material circumstances like education, financial independence and freedom help women to assert themselves and make their lives meaningful and fulfilling; whether women have a greater connection to the natural environment; whether upbringing governs how a woman responds to the inequalities faced by her in the society making her bitter, weaker or stronger; whether a woman will always have to disguise the truth in veils of modesty. However the question that remains unanswered is to what extent the woman is an accepted part of the socio-political cultural tradition without having to fight her way at every step.

Chitra and Aruna can be seen as representing three facets of women's lives: i) the romance between men and women, ii) social oppression of women and iii) the birth of the *new woman* – that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions about her own life.

The writers explore the woman's quest for love, freedom and harmony through the characters of Chitra, Aruna and Uma. The focus is on the constant struggle of the woman to find a point of convergence between tradition and self fulfilment even as she tries to assert herself as an individual who thinks

independently and does not limit herself to the role of a daughter/sister/wife/mother.

Strangely Volga's *Swetcha*, written in late 20<sup>th</sup> century and Tagore's lyrical play written in early 20<sup>th</sup> century were both seen as unobtrusive assaults on established social norms inimical to the progress of women. They do not challenge the establishment through a bold portrayal of women but portrays women who are not simplistic; they are complex, with many layers to their personalities. These two works are juxtaposed to bring out the fact that love is not just an emotion but a strong motivating force that shapes a woman's life. In both the works the protagonist's love is not for the person that the man represents, but for the affirmation of her own self as one equal to his in all respects; it is her search for love that goes beyond the physical and emotional bonds of need/gratitude and enters a higher plane.

The strong and unorthodox characters of Chitra and Aruna show the woman's ability to endure. The woman neither submits nor transforms herself; she stands erect; she bends but does not break as she transcends her limitations and ultimately discovers her true potential and asserts herself as an intelligent and courageous person. These two works depict the falsifications that a woman is forced to succumb to, as well as the social conditioning that circumscribes her existence while she endeavours to cross the limits set by patriarchy.

*Swetcha* begins with Aruna and Uma, two young women who are friends. Aruna, who loves Prakash and marries him believing that her marriage would mark the beginning of a new phase in her life that brings greater purpose and meaning to her erstwhile dissatisfactory existence in her maternal home where she has been subject to nothing but male domination. Her hope for freedom slowly wanes as she realizes that it is not mere social norms that impose restrictions on her freedom but the mindset of people around her, be it her husband or her colleagues. Innumerable experiences that appear insignificant on the surface help her see beneath the surface of people's words and behaviour. Her efforts to make a meaningful contribution to the society by writing for a periodical published by a colleague and other supposedly

progressive people, also turns out to be a futile effort, for she soon realizes that it was all a facade and the men involved in that work were actually very narrow minded and chauvinistic in their personal lives. Not one of them understands her when she expresses her angst, her sincere commitment to what she believed was genuine cause and purposeful work. When Aruna leaves home and goes to her friend Uma, looking for some space and time to come to terms with her changed circumstances, she is torn apart and heartbroken at her separation from her little daughter, she does not hesitate to question the escapist tendency in her friend's decision to settle for a live-in relationship rather than marriage for fear of losing her freedom. Aruna matures with age and experience to know that freedom is a state of mind and does not come with change in external circumstances. She sets out on her quest for real freedom with a firm conviction that she needs to expand her vision to include the wider world beyond herself and her family. Aruna's character escapes being defined as just a symbol. The tremendous verve, with which Volga invests her, makes her a real living personality, and her quest is something any thinking woman can identify with. The concept of the novel is hidden in a simple passage where she declares: 'I need a living, dynamic relationship with the world around me. My existence should make a difference to the society I live in. I don't want the freedom that is confined only to the limited purview of my personal life. My freedom carries a greater significance and meaning. My task is to look for that meaning and purpose.'

*Chitra* is based on a story from the Mahabharata but Tagore modified it and made it an exploration of the woman's inner self. Chitrangoda, the mythic princess who is brought up as a son to rule the kingdom of Manipur, falls in love with the great warrior Arjun and boldly proposes to him. When he rejects her, she begs Madana, the god of love, and Vasanta, the god of beauty, to transform her into a feminine beauty. Chitra finds herself in a predicament: she is in a conflict and is prepared to forgo the opportunity to win Arjuna's heart through the supposedly feminine beauty bestowed on her because she feels that it would be better to reveal her true self to him and is prepared to bear another rejection even if it breaks her heart. However she is assured by Vasanta that "When with the advent of autumn the flowering season is over then comes the

*triumph of fruitage. A time will come of itself when the heat-cloyed bloom of the body will droop and Arjuna will gladly accept the abiding fruitful truth".*

It is interesting to note that Arjuna who is said to have been under a vow of celibacy, falls for her falsified beauty and is happy to share a year of passionate love with Chitra not even knowing who she really is. It is ironical that after days of idyllic lovemaking, he hears of the warrior-princess Chitra and longs for his equal. In the end, Chitrangoda declares herself thus: *"I am Chitrangoda. Neither goddess nor servant am I. If you let me stand by your side at your darkest hour, let me be the friend of your soul, let me share in your joys and sorrows, only then shall you know me."*

In this utterly contemporary play by Tagore and the novel by Volga which came at a time when feminist ideology had been making its presence felt in various parts of India, the protagonists' struggles reveal the magnitude of losses a woman has to be prepared for, but the underlying hope is not lost. They are expressions of *that* truth to which we are so accustomed that we have forgotten all about it. The writers did not construe their work to be a sermon or a moral. Simply put, these are about human sensibilities transcending the barriers of gender. *Swetcha* is about man and woman working side by side, about the dynamics of human relationships and the inner conflicts of a woman. *Chitra* is about the conflict between the self and the desire for togetherness, the will to live one's life based on one's own convictions and the need to compromise on one's principles/beliefs if one wishes to share life with another, the obstacles one has to face if one chooses to take the road not taken by the majority. Both the works are about that barrier which separates fellow beings and that common bond which keeps us together. All this is surely not so different from other great works of art and literature, and touches upon the core of life itself.

To comprehend fully Tagore's constantly evolving thoughts on women, we will first need to turn to his time. Born in 1861, he came of age at a time when the currents of three movements had reached the shores of India: i) the religious: Rammohan Roy had founded the Brahmo Samaj (1828), which had a

profound impact; ii) a literary revolution had begun; and iii) a nationalist movement had started to give voice to Indian people's discontent against colonial rule. The poet's mind and sensibilities were shaped by these influences. Rabindranath lived for eighty eventful years in colonial Bengal. In *Chitra* we find the princess depicted as physically awakened and conscious of her desires. With the nationalist movement, a barrier broke down and the effect of this change was felt in the domestic arena also. Women for the first time saw themselves reflected through a public mirror. In fighting against the British domination, many of them also began to resent their domestic bondage. They started to question the inequality that existed between men and women. Acclaimed writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), questioned in a forceful voice: "I ask you, Mr. Astronomer, you are gazing at the sky, but why is your wife not by your side?" (Rokeya Rachanabali, 30) Liberal men also raised their voices on discrimination between men and women. Kazi Nazrul Islam proclaimed: "I sing the song of equality. In my eyes there is no difference between men and women." ("Naari," Nazrul Rachanabali, Vol. 1: 241) Such was, very briefly, the literary environment in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Tagore wrote: "The similarities and differences that mark the two distinct identities of men and women are both equally weighty. Yet, it is the differences that stand out with heavy bias." (Rabindra Rachanabali, Vol. 13: 21) Volga's work also reflects the discriminatory treatment of women that had existed, complacently in our society for ages. She asserts that men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past. Even as Tagore and Volga looked at women as sources of inspiration and imagination, they situated women in their real worlds, portrayed them as thinking, reasoning and desiring persons who were constrained by social rules and norms. They subtly asserted the fact that the idea of women as beings to be used was not acceptable; women had particular sensibilities and needed to be respected not just claimed. Although not painted in bold strokes, the strength of the woman is perceptible. Women in these two works have both the space and the individuality to express their considered views on love, life and relationships. They are invested with the power to make decisions for themselves.

While the customs and conventions connected with love and marriage, and the associated complications of caste, creed and family, are not blatantly criticised, it is made amply clear that meaningless orthodox customs need not be tolerated. Advocating freedom for women is easier than actually empathising with their situation and state of mind. One may be actively associated with the social emancipation of women but it takes greater sensitivity to understand why Chitra resorted to the rather demeaning exercise of beautifying herself to attract Arjuna, who, in spite of all his accomplishments, does come across as rather shallow. The redeeming feature is that Chitra declares her true self and chooses to be his companion, equal in all respects. However, one wonders why she waits until Arjuna tires of the superficiality of a passionate relationship that apparently lacks depth and truthfulness. While Tagore's heroine shows a boldness of resolution that elicits admiration, the social conventions prevalent at the dawn of the 20th century seem to have deterred him from depicting women as free from the mindset that is the result of social conditioning in a patriarchal society.

Aruna in *Swetcha* explores the question of equality and freedom from the point of view that Betty Freidan expressed in her book *The Second Stage*, "How do we transcend the polarization between women and women and between women and men, to achieve the new human wholeness that is the promise of feminism, and get on with solving the concrete, practical, everyday problems of living, working, and loving as equal persons?" Volga's portrayal of Aruna and Uma is based on the premise of rights and equality but there is also the subtle yet often unvoiced question of fulfilment which a woman strives for through her untiring efforts to satisfy every need of every person in her family, even at the cost of her personal comfort or even health.

It is essential to briefly focus on certain basic differences in the Western and Indian viewpoints. Women of the West had to fight for their rights because they had to win back their rights from their religion, the church, and the state. For centuries men had been fighting for the very rights that women fought for; the only difference was that men fought against institutions and women had to fight against both men and the institutions. Hence the idea of rights is central to

the Western idea of progress and what the media projects as modernisation. However it has to be understood that people anywhere insist on rights only to get dignity and respect. In fact people demand rights only when dignity and respect are denied. It follows therefore that if one commands respect, one does not need to fight for rights. It is interesting to note that the Volga brilliantly portrays this conflict of today's Indian woman through the character of Aruna who does not demand rights to add to her power, she longs for true respect that will not rob her of moral authority at the relationship level. Unlike her husband Prakash and other men whom she interacts with, she does not want to merely satisfy her ego within and outside. She only believes that the rule of respect applies to both men and women in families and communities.

The advent of unwed motherhood, single parent families and live-in relations, which are the direct consequence of the assertion of rights over families, has adversely affected women more than men, as most women are innately sensitive to the needs of others and have a genuine capacity to create, nurture and cherish. So the woman's struggle to find her identity and freedom have often caused her immense pain and she had to fight a lone battle at the cost of the well being of her family and ultimately of the society. The real woman has never demanded unbridled rights but only sought to restore the respect for women and demanded that womanhood should not be trivialised or commodified. She has only been on a quest for freedom from meaningless practices and recognition and acceptance of her dignity.

In *Chitra* and *Swetcha* it is a victory over one's own insecurities as a woman and over the general perceptions of a woman's capabilities. In both, it is a victory of love, of infinite love. It is a victory of the spirit, of the supreme expression of spirit that this frail vessel is capable of. Chitra and Aruna not only find their deliverance through sacrifice, but they redeem others too through their self-sacrifice: Chitra contributes to the emancipation of Arjuna and Aruna aspires to contribute to the freedom of women in her society.

The strong and unorthodox characters of Chitra, Uma and Aruna show the woman's ability to endure. The woman neither submits nor transforms

herself; she stands erect; she bends but does not break as she transcends her limitations and ultimately discovers her true potential and asserts herself as an intelligent and courageous person. The paper focuses on how these two works depict the falsifications that a woman is forced to succumb to, as well as the social conditioning that circumscribes her existence while she endeavours to cross the limits set by patriarchy. As Prof. Iyengar points out, 'the issue is between the temporal power and the spiritual power of love. Love conquers all and the power of the spirit is irresistible. Like air or water or fire, it freshens, it cleanses, it purifies and it transmutes dross into gold.'

A vision of the universal behind the particulars is effectively conveyed through these highly symbolic literary works. The love of Chitra and Aruna symbolises the highest truth in the human world, a truth for which men and women, in all times and countries, have been willing and eager to make the supreme sacrifice from a conviction that behind this spirit in man is God. Even if we do not believe in this God, or in any God, our experience in the home or in the family or in the community shows that love is truth.

While *Chitra* and *Swetcha* do not make any strident assertions of women's rights, they reflect a remarkable understanding of woman's psyche, portray the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocate greater freedom and decision-making power for women in their personal lives as well as the larger society. The conflicts and crises faced by Chitra and Aruna reflect the confrontation between illusion and reality, and the problem of prioritising between contributing meaningfully to the continuing life of the whole community and seeking harmony in the inner rhythm of the individual soul.

The woman's voice is neither of dissent nor of acquiescence; rather it expresses her innate desire to protect and preserve her Self. The woman's voice reflects her deep urge to strike a note of harmony in the cacophony of strife, conflict, deprivation and disillusionment. The woman's quest for freedom can be aptly summed up in Tagore's words: "True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action..." (Essays, Lectures, Addresses – Rabindranath Tagore, p 484)

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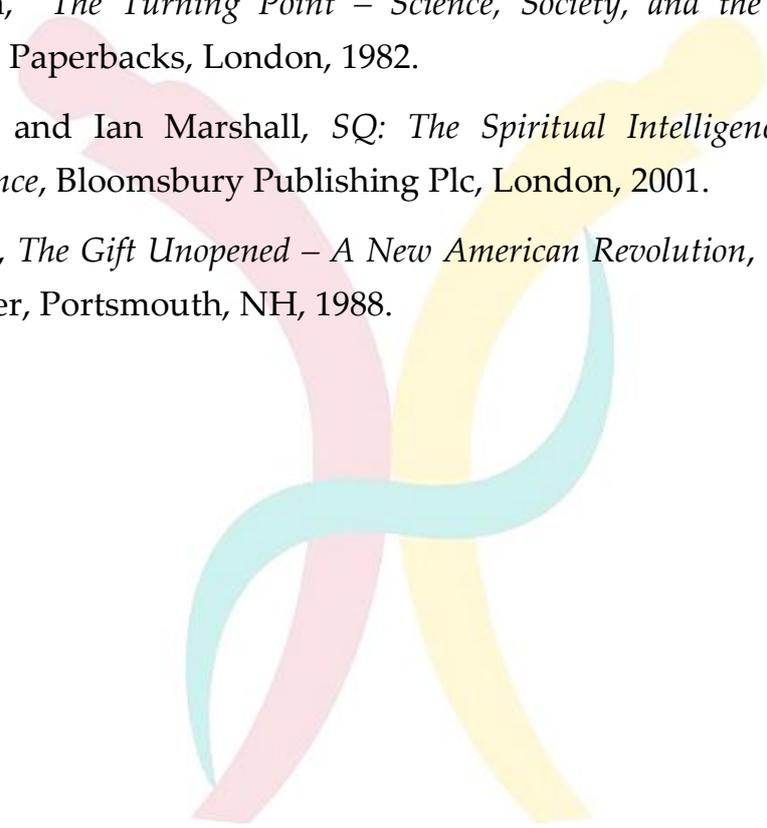
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